The Hidden Cipher of *Dream of the Red Chamber*: Projection, Intertext, Prototype, and the Allegory of the End of an Era

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Abstract

This study adopts the analytical framework of **"projection–intertext–prototype"** to examine the allegorical structure and historical implications of *Dream of the Red Chamber*. It argues that the novel is far more than a domestic narrative; rather, it is a literary cipher that interweaves history and memory through a system of projected identities. By fragmenting and reconfiguring the traits and destinies of real historical figures into multiple fictional personae, the author constructs an intricate network of mirrored projections that defines the novel's underlying narrative logic.

Supporting this analytical framework are mourning texts such as *Reminiscences of the Shadow Plum Hermitage* (*Yingmei'an Yiyu*) function as intertextual "cipher sources." Through character correspondences, poetic parallels, and narrative fragments, they provide both the real-world foundation and the symbolic framework for the novel's design. From these interactions emerge four interpretive dimensions—temporal, character, spatial, and cultural ciphers—which together form the allegorical structure centered on "entry into the palace and mourning."

Within its first eighty chapters, the novel has already fulfilled the author's intended narrative design through its system of projections and reverse chronology, thereby unfolding an end-of-an-era allegory beneath its surface story. This study seeks to reveal the historical symbolism and creative intent underlying that structure, offering a renewed perspective on the compositional logic and allegorical vision of *Dream of the Red Chamber*.

Keywords

Dream of the Red Chamber, Reminiscences of the Shadow Plum Hermitage, projectional structure, prototype puzzle, intertextual mechanism, dialectic of reality and illusion, end-of-an-era allegory.

Terminology

This study employs several key terms that require clarification at the outset:

- **Imagery** — the minimal analytical unit of meaning, encompassing motifs such as flora, attire, color, and classical allusion.
- **Motif** — a recurrent and symbolically charged combination of images found within the novel and its related texts, e.g., the "Yang Guifei motif."
- **Chain** — an internal logical link that connects characters or images across the narrative, such as the "Lin Dai-yu projection chain."
- **Intertext** — a cross-textual relation of correspondence or rewriting, such as the echo between *Dream of the Red Chamber* and *Reminiscences of the Shadow Plum Hermitage*.
- **Allegory** — the overarching structural system through which the novel encodes its historical and cultural symbolism. In the chain of "entering the palace → mourning," the narrative advances allegorically from personal grief toward dynastic transition and the trauma of an ending era.

To maintain clarity in the analysis, fictional characters' names are hyphenated to indicate their character-based function.

Introduction

Since its creation, *Dream of the Red Chamber* has been regarded as one of the most intricate and enigmatic works in Chinese literature, renowned for its multilayered narrative design, cultural density, and the enduring mystery of its authorship. This study proposes and applies a new analytical framework, the projection–intertext–prototype triad, to investigate the novel's internal logic and its fusion of literary form and historical allegory.

The argument proceeds on two interrelated levels. On the structural level, it uncovers the self-contained narrative logic and hidden ciphers embedded within the text. On the interpretive level, it employs a systematic, puzzle-solving mode of reading to demonstrate how the novel rewrites the historical trauma of the Ming-Qing transition through allegorical narration. In other words, the study attends both to the novel's literary presentation and to the historical projections beneath it, aiming to illuminate *Dream of the Red Chamber* as a dual act of fiction and historical remembrance.

The discussion unfolds in four parts:

1. **Projectional Structure and Narrative Function** — showing how the novel fragments and redistributes the traits of real historical figures among multiple characters, creating a mosaic-like network of mirrored identities.

2. **Intertextual Evidence** — examining texts such as *Reminiscences of the Shadow Plum Hermitage* as "cipher sources," and revealing how the author embeds clues within their intertextual relations.

3. **Four Cipher Dimensions** — proposing temporal, character, spatial, and cultural ciphers that together form the novel's "palatial cipher system," through which an allegorical image of a mourned palace woman emerges.

4. **Expansion through Female Figures** — analyzing characters such as Wang Xi-feng, Jia Tan-chun, and Jia Ying-chun to expose the novel's pervasive end-of-an-era theme, and demonstrating, through projectional design and reverse chronology, that the first eighty chapters already constitute a complete and autonomous narrative cycle.

Part I. Projectional Structure and Narrative Function

A. The Narrative Starting Point of Projection: Bao-yu's Self-Revealing Allegory

In the overall narrative of *Dream of the Red Chamber*[1], the phenomenon of **projection** is particularly striking. Many characters are not independent individuals but echo each other through mirroring, division, and complementarity. Such projections are revealed through delicate connections in appearance, temperament, poetry, and symbolic imagery.

In this section, the discussion begins with the central figures, Lin Dai-yu and Xue Bao-chai, examining how their projectional system unfolds layer by layer in the story, establishing the novel's narrative network and cipher-like structure.

In Chapter 19, Jia Bao-yu tells Lin Dai-yu a story about *Xiang-yu* ("Fragrant Jade") to amuse her. He says that on the *La-ba* Festival day, a group of mice were sent out on a mission to steal. Each mouse received its task, but none was assigned to steal the *xiangyu* (taro). Then a very small and weak mouse said it could use the method of "projection" to transform into a taro and steal it cleverly. After finishing the story, Bao-yu teases Dai-yu, saying that this little mouse eventually turned into "the daughter of Lord Lin of the Salt Revenue Office."

There are no idle words in the author's writing. This seemingly playful story actually marks the beginning of the "projection" motif. It not only suggests the narrative strategy through the literal meaning of "projection technique" but also, through the pun "Xiang-yu = Miss Lin,"hints at multiple reflections within the character of Dai-yu herself.

B. Lin Dai-yu's Chain of Projected Figures

1. Those Who Resemble Dai-yu in Appearance and Temperament

a. Qing-wen

In Chapter 74, Qing-wen is described by Lady Wang as "having a waist like a water snake, sloping shoulders, and brows and eyes somewhat like your Cousin Lin's (Dai-yu)," and is nicknamed "the sick Xi Shi." Xi Shi was one of the renowned beauties of ancient China.

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[1] *Dream of the Red Chamber* (People's Literature Publishing House, reprint edition, November 2005; same hereafter).

In Chapter 3, when Bao-yu first meets Dai-yu, he nicknames her “Pin-pin,” a name derived from Xi Shi’s archetypal image of the “frowning beauty.” Through this shared motif, Dai-yu and Qing-wen mirror one another.

Qing-wen not only resembles Dai-yu in appearance. Her skill in sewing and the detail of mending Bao-yu’s damaged sparrow-gold fur coat also form, on the intertextual level, an implicit line of the “Needle Goddess,” which will be further explained later.

b. Ling-guan

Ling-guan, one of the twelve actresses in the Jia household, is skilled in singing and acting performance. In Chapter 30, Bao-yu sees her “with brows like spring hills, eyes like autumn water, a thin face and slender waist, graceful and elegant, greatly resembling Dai-yu.”

c. You San-jie

In Chapter 65, the servant Xing-er introduces Dai-yu to the You sisters, saying, “Her face and figure are not unlike Third Mistress (You San-jie).”

He also praises both Dai-yu and Bao-chai as “rare in heaven and unique on earth.” In Chapter 66, Jia Lian also praises You San-jie, saying, “Her looks are truly one of a kind in all ages.”

The text illustrates that You San-jie and Dai-yu (as well as Bao-chai) share the same level of admiration, forming a parallel correspondence.

The deeper meaning of You San-jie’s story with Liu Xiang-lian will be explored later in this study.

d. Liu Wu-er

In Chapter 60, Liu Wu’er is described as “having long been weak,” and in Chapter 61, “her heart was full of grievance and sorrow, with nowhere to tell it, crying all night.”

Her frail body and sorrowful nature correspond to Dai-yu’s image of constant tears and illness. Although Liu Wu-er is a minor character, she is not irrelevant. She will be mentioned again later in this study to further illustrate the “projection” theme.

These four “shadow figures,” from appearance and temperament to subtle description, all mirror Dai-yu. The novel thus constructs a “cipher garden,” in which each character is a cipher, and every projected figure is a hidden entrance leading toward Dai-yu’s prototype level.

2. Symbolic Projections Corresponding to Dai-yu

a. Xue Bao-chai and the Symbolic Structure of "The Union of Chai and Dai"

1) The Juxtaposition of Commentaries and Lyrics

In *Dream of the Red Chamber*, Xue Bao-chai is presented merely as an independent character, but as one closely mirrored by Lin Dai-yu.
In Chapter 42 of the *Gengchen* edition, Zhi Yanzhai's commentary in *The Story of the Stone*[2] explicitly states: "Chai and Yu, though two names, are in fact one body."

This remark provides an important clue for reading the text as "the union of Chai and Dai."

The juxtaposition between their prophetic poems and Dream Songs also reveals this mirrored design.

The prophecy in Chapter 5 reads:
"One is mourned for a virtue that could only be expended (Bao-chai), the other pitied for a talent that found no refuge (Dai-yu).
A jade belt hangs in the forest (Dai-yu); a golden pin is buried in the snow (Bao-chai)."

This is the only prophecy among the "Twelve Beauties of Jinling" that appears as a pair.

The same chapter's *Dream Song of "Vain Longing"* (*Wang Ning Mei*) also contains two lines:
"One is a fairy blossom of the Paradise Garden; One is flawless jade beyond the dust."

The word "Paradise Garden" originates from Hong Sheng's *The Palace of Eternal Life*[3], which says,
"I picked the fragrant herb of *hengwu*, treading through the paradise garden, seeking my dream among the fields of jade."

The *hengwu* herb is also a celestial plant, echoing the *Hengwu Garden* where Bao-chai lives, implying that she, like the Fairy Crimson Pearl (Jiang-zhu, Dai-yu's previous incarnation), is also a celestial plant.

Furthermore, *The Palace of Eternal Life* tells the story of **Yang Guifei**, and Bao-yu once

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[2] Zhi Yanzhai's Re-Commentary on *The Story of the Stone* (Gengchen version), People's Literature Publishing House, January 2010 edition.

[3] Hong Sheng, *The Palace of Eternal Life*, Act 46, "Seeking the Soul."

compared Bao-chai to Yang Guifei in Chapter 27. Therefore, “the fairy blossom of the Paradise Garden” in fact refers to Bao-chai.

The phrase “flawless jade” originates from *Romance of the Western Chamber*[4], which praises Cui Yingying:
“She is a tender flawless jade, a beauty whose powder and cloud-like hair shine with spring.”

When Bao-yu and Dai-yu read *Romance of the Western Chamber* together, Bao-yu quotes its lines to express his feelings:
“I am a body full of sorrow and illness, and you are the beauty who can bring down a kingdom.”

Hence, Bao-yu compares Dai-yu to Cui Yingying, and the image of “flawless jade” naturally shifts toward Dai-yu’s symbol.

In *The Dream Song “A Lifelong Error” (Zhong Shen Wu)*, both women again appear within the same song:
A lofty sage in the mountains, pure as glistening snow; A lonely fairy in the forest, lost amid the woods.

(Here, “snow” echoes the pronunciation of Xue, symbolizing Xue Bao-chai; while “woods” echoes Lin, symbolizing Lin Dai-yu.)

They are joined in one song, symbolizing that their identities and destinies are inseparable.

2) The “Yang Guifei” Label and Bao-chai’s Palace Implication

In Chapter 4, Bao-chai’s first appearance describes her as “awaiting selection to enter the palace.” Later, she is repeatedly associated with the Yang Guifei motif.

In Chapter 27, Bao-yu says to Bao-chai, “No wonder they compare you to Lady Yang, you do look full-bodied and prone to heat.”

Although Bao-chai dislikes this comment, it establishes her symbolic link with Yang Guifei.

The narrative then repeatedly strengthens this parallel.

- The title of Chapter 27: “At the Dripping-Green Pavilion, Yang Guifei Flirts with Butterflies; At the Fragrant Tomb, Feiyan Weeps for Fallen Blossoms,” juxtaposes “Yang Guifei / Feiyan,” echoing “Bao-chai / Dai-yu.”

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[4] Wang Shifu, *The Romance of the Western Chamber*, Book III, Act III.

- Chapter 5 describes the ornaments in Qin Ke-qing's chamber:
  "The golden plate of Feiyan dancing, and the wooden carving of An Lushan striking Taizhen's breast, (Taizhen being Yang Guifei),"
  again forming the "Yang Guifei–Feiyan" pairing corresponding to Bao-chai and Dai-yu.

- In Chapter 37, Bao-yu's poem on the white begonia reads:
  "Fresh from the bath, Yang Guifei glows like ice; with hand to heart, Xi Shi holds the soul of jade."
  Here, Yang Guifei and Xi Shi appear together, continuing the juxtaposition pattern.

It is evident that the author consciously employs composite imagery, anchoring Bao-chai within the "Yang Guifei–palace" symbolic chain, while allowing Dai-yu to shift among multiple images.

It is worth noting that Dai-yu's historical correspondence is not fixed: she is the reincarnation of Feiyan and Xi Shi, and when reading *The Western Chamber* with Bao-yu, she also becomes Cui Yingying.
This constant "transformation" reflects Day-yu's special position as the **hub of projections**.

3) The Hidden Code of Granny Liu's Two Stories

In Chapter 39, the two stories told by Granny Liu—"The Girl Who Collected Firewood in the Snow" and "Ming-yu"—further correspond to the paired structure of "the union of Chai and Dai."

The first story uses "snow" to echo "Xue" (Bao-chai), corresponding to her prophecy "A golden pin buried in the snow" and her song line "Pure as crystal snow." The girl in the story, "seventeen or eighteen, with oiled black hair and wearing a red jacket," visually recalls Bao-yu's encounter with Bao-chai in Chapter 8:
"Her oiled black hair was glossy and smooth, tied in a bun"; she wore a red jacket underneath, a honey-colored lined coat, and a rose-purple vest."

The second story, "Ming-yu," corresponds directly to Dai-yu through the word *yu* ("jade"), while also containing another meaning:
When Granny Liu tells the first story, a sudden fire breaks out: "From the southeast corner a red light rose."
Later, the narrative turns to the story of the servant Ming-yan finding "a ruined temple on the northeastern embankment, where the God of Plague had taken residence." The temple of "Ming-yu" thus becomes a usurped space.

More crucially, after finishing the story of "Ming-yu," Granny Liu abruptly concludes with the line: "The girl who collected firewood was her," merging the two heroines by forced identification.

The author's structure is carefully arranged. Through the juxtaposition of "two stories–two images" and their forced fusion, the narrative quietly extends a deeper historical implication.

This hidden thread is made concrete through two symbolic codes:

- **The Color Code**

  The first story's "snow" corresponds to "Xue (snow/Bao-chai)." In Chapter 8, her outer garments are in shades of yellow and purple, the official color scheme reserved for the Qing imperial family, while her inner jacket is bright red, symbolizing the Zhu lineage of the fallen Ming dynasty.
  This outer-Qing–inner-Ming design suggests Bao-chai's position within the implied "palace–dynastic transition" narrative.

- **The Geographical Code**

  The shift from "the southeast corner's firelight" to "the northeast's ruined temple" symbolizes a move from the warm, prosperous Jiangnan—the cultural heartland of the Ming—to the cold northern frontier—the birthplace of the Ming and the Qing. It metaphorically expresses both the Ming–Qing transition and Dai-yu's northward fate.

Through these two symbolic threads, Granny Liu's "merged stories" become not only textual ingenuity but also a concealed historical allegory.

The overlapping of the two female figures quietly links the destinies of Dai-yu and Bao-chai, of the Ming and Qing dynasties, and of the boudoir and the palace.

4) The Symbolic Transference of the Parrot–Yang Guifei–Dai-yu

The Miscellaneous Records of Emperor Minghuang[5] records that Yang Guifei raised a white parrot able to recite poetry:
"The Emperor ordered it to learn the poems of recent courtiers, and after several repetitions it could recite them all."

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[5] Zheng Chuhui, *Miscellaneous Records of Emperor Ming* vol. 46; LiuTie no. 94.

In Chapter 35 of *Dream of the Red Chamber*, Dai-yu's parrot is made to recite:
"When I bury my flowers, people laugh at my folly; Who will bury me when I am gone?"
The novel borrows this cultural motif and rewrites it: the image of "the parrot that recites poetry," originally belonging to Yang Guifei, is transferred to Dai-yu. Thus, Dai-yu and Bao-chai (Yang Guifei) are once again placed within the same symbolic chain.

Therefore, the "union of Chai and Dai" is not merely the merging of two characters but a narrative strategy of projection. Through their juxtaposition, the novel, mediated by the figure of Qin Ke-qing who embodies the ideal of Dual Beauty, constructs a symbolic bridge linking the boudoir to the palace.

b. Qin Ke-qing: The "Imperial Funeral" and Its Dynastic Implications

1) The Starting Point of Projection: "Dual Beauty" and the Union of Chai and Dai

Among the "Twelve Beauties of Jinling," Qin Ke-qing is placed last, and her characterization carries from the beginning a sense of double projection.

In Chapter 5, when Jia Bao-yu visits the Realm of Illusion, Qin Ke-qing is called the fairy "Dual Beauty" (*jian-mei*), "as bright and charming as Bao-chai, yet as graceful and delicate as Dai-yu."

This designation gives her, from the outset, the structural feature of a composite projection, uniting both main heroines.

After Qin Ke-qin's death in Chapter 13, the reactions within the Jia household differ sharply. Her husband, Jia Rong, shows little emotion, while her father-in-law, Jia Zhen, "wept until he was like a man made of tears."

Such emotion between father-in-law and daughter-in-law, bordering on impropriety, corresponds symbolically to the historical story of Yang Guifei, who was originally the wife of Emperor Xuanzong's son, Prince Shou, before entering the palace as the emperor's consort.
The novel thus embeds a palatial metaphor within an ethical transgression.

Even more unusual is Bao-yu's reaction: upon hearing the news of Qin Ke-qin's passing, "he felt as if a knife had struck his heart and spat out a mouthful of blood."
This excessive grief reveals an emotional connection beyond ordinary reason.

Qin Ke-qing's twofold transgression, ethical (Jia Zhen) and emotional (Bao-yu), together reveals her structural function as the figure of "Dual Beauty."

She not only embodies the projectional unity of Chai and Dai, but also symbolizes the fusion between the boudoir and the palace, between private sentiment and imperial allegory.
Her funeral narrative, with its transgressive ritual scale, further strengthens the symbolic hierarchy of her implied identity.

2) The "Transgressive" Funeral Scale and the Metaphor of a State Funeral

In Chapter 14, Qin Ke-qing's funeral arrangements, which approach the spectacle of a state funeral, clearly exceed the proper rites for a family daughter-in-law.

First, the four princes from the east, west, south, and north personally set up tents for the memorial, while eight dukes joined the procession in unprecedented grandeur.

Second, Zhi Yanzhai comments in *The Story of the Stone* that "the Twelve Branches are hidden within the story."

Among the eight dukes—six names, as well as those of Ning and Rong— can be deciphered as symbols of the twelve earthly branches through wordplay and homophone riddles:

- Niu Qing (Niu = Ox = *Chou*; Qing, belonging to water = *Zi*),
- Liu Biao (Liu = *Mao*; Biao = Tiger = *Yin*),
- Chen Yi (Chen = *Chen*; Yi = Fire = Snake = *Si*),
- Ma Kui (Ma = Horse = *Wu*; Kui splits as *gui* = Ghost = Goat = *Wei*),
- Hou Xiaoming (Hou = Monkey = *Shen*; Xiao-ming = Dawn's cry = Rooster = *You*),
- Shi Guangzhu (Shi = Pig = *Hai*; his ancestor's name "Shou-ye / Shou-ye" hints at Dog = *Xu*).

The author thus embeds coded signs in these names.
Shi Guangzhu, who failed to attend the funeral, leaves an intentional blank, symbolizing nobility that falls just short of the supreme position.

Hence, the scale of Qin Ke-qing's funeral approaches that of a princely court; the arrangement of "four princes and eight dukes" evokes an imperial gathering of the four directions, symbolizing universal mourning.

3) The "Eternal" Coffin and the Foster Father's Position

In Chapter 13, Xue Pan offers to provide a coffin made of "ironwood from Mount Tie-wang," said to "last ten thousand years." Jia Zheng remarks that "this is not something ordinary people can enjoy."

The phrase "ten thousand years" is traditionally used for imperial tombs and palaces, implying eternal preservation. "Not for ordinary people" hints at an exalted status above the clan hierarchy.

Through both material choice and dialogue, the narrative again suggests that Qin Ke-qing's funeral possesses a meaning beyond family rites, verging on the level of imperial ceremony.

Equally noteworthy is her foster father Qin Ye, whose position as *Supervisor of Palace Construction (Yingshan Lang)* resonates with the Directorate of Works in the Ming and early Qing, responsible for constructing palaces, temples, and imperial tombs.

This designation is no coincidence: it corresponds precisely to the imperial implication of her funeral.

4) "Seven Sevens Forty-Nine Days" and "One Hundred and Eight Monks"

In Chapter 13, Qin Ke-qing's body is kept "for forty-nine days of mourning" and "one hundred and eight monks are invited to recite the Great Compassion Sutra in the main hall."

Both numbers originate from Buddhist ritual symbolism of completeness.
Such solemn arrangements far exceed normal family funerals and faintly echo imperial rites, foreshadowing the palatial narrative that follows.

Thus, Qin Ke-qing's death completes three levels of transgression within the narrative:

(a)Status transgression: her "Dual Beauty" role becomes the combined projection of Dai-yu and Bao-chai;

(b) Emotional transgression: Bao-yu's bleeding grief places her symbolically among Dai-yu's projected doubles;

(c) Ritual transgression: her funeral, with four princes, eight dukes, zodiac ciphers, an imperial coffin, and a hundred monks, creates the effect of a near–state funeral.

Through these processes, Qin Ke-qing's identity as a Dual Beauty projection becomes a key extension of Dai-yu's symbolic system.
She connects Bao-chai's "entry into the palace" thread and elevates the "union of Chai and Dai"

to the palatial level, marking a transition from the boudoir narrative to the allegory of the imperial consort and state funeral.

Her death and burial therefore serve not only as a prelude to Dai-yu's fate but also as a symbolic progression within the novel's entire network of female projections.

c. Yuan-chun and the Ritual Transgression of the "Homecoming Visit"

1) The Prophecy Poem and the Palace Imagery

In Chapter 5, Jia Yuan-chun's prophetic poem reads, "The pomegranate blossoms open, shining upon the palace gates."

The image of the pomegranate flower is linked to the story of Yang Guifei: it is said that she favored crimson pomegranate skirts, and Emperor Xuanzong therefore planted pomegranate trees throughout the palace gardens, giving rise to the saying "to bow before the pomegranate skirt."
Thus, both the "pomegranate blossom" in the prophecy and Yuan-chun's title "Virtuous Consort" place her within the Yang Guifei–palace chain in the projectional system of Dai-yu and Bao-chai.

2) The Displacement of Courtly Rituals

In Chapter 18 of *Dream of the Red Chamber*, the depiction of Yuan-chun's homecoming visit seems to adhere to the formal protocols of a palace ceremony, yet subtly encodes a pattern of narrative displacement.

Ritual Displacement
Yuan-chun's carriage, "a golden-roofed phoenix-embroidered chariot," according to *Qingbai Leichao · Carriages and Boats* [6], was originally reserved for the empress, not for a mere consort.

Her use of it shows that her status already approaches that of the the empress, marking a clear transgression of ritual rank.

Temporal Displacement
Yuan-chun's departure to visit her family begins around the first hour of the Dog (about 7 p.m.), and she reaches the Jia mansion at night, returning to the palace only at "the third quarter of the second watch" (about 2:45 a.m.).
Historically, there is no precedent for a concubine to visit her family. This midnight journey

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[6] Xu Ke (ed.), Qingbai Leichao: Section "Clothing, Boats & Carriages" (late Qing/early Republican edition).

resembles a dreamlike visitation.

Thus, beneath the solemn surface of palace ritual, the entire "homecoming" unfolds as an ethereal illusion.

Narrative Correspondence

Qin Ke-qing's death occurs "after the third watch" (around 11 p.m. to 1 a.m.), overlapping in time with Yuan-chun's banquet.
Life and death thus mirror each other.
Moreover, in Chapter 13, on the night of Qin Ke-qing's death, her spirit appears in Lady Wang Xi-feng's dream, foretelling that Yuan-chun's so-called "grand celebration" is but "oil on fire and flowers upon brocade," a brief splendor destined to dissolve into "the scattered feast."
Therefore, Yuan-chun's midnight visit is closer to an illusory spectacle, a brief dreamlike return home, than to a real event.

Qin Ke-qing and Yuan-chun mirror each other in structure: one, through death, receives a funeral nearly of empress rank; the other, while alive, is granted empress-like honors.
One departs, one returns; one in death, one in life, both break through the boundaries of their prescribed status.

Together they form a dual transgression of the palace order, laying the groundwork for the novel's transition from the boudoir narrative to the palace narrative.

d. Qiao-jie and the "Yang Guifei" Chain of the Seventh Night

Qiao-jie is also one of the most mysterious figures among the "Twelve Beauties of Jinling."
She has no dialogue throughout the first eighty chapters, yet is formally listed in the principal register.
This "entry without speech" indicates her special role within the novel's structural design.

1) Qiao-jie's Birthday

Qiao-jie's birthday falls on the Seventh Night (the Qixi Festival).
Qixi is not only the Weaver Girl's lovers' festival in folklore but, through *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow*, it is also linked to Yang Guifei and Emperor Xuanzong's love story: "On the seventh day of the seventh month in the Hall of Eternal Life."

Thus, Qiao-jie is naturally included in the "Yang Guifei" symbolic chain, echoing and continuing the imagery of Bao-chai, Qin Ke-qing, and Yuan-chun.

2) Spinning and the Rural Imagery

In Chapter 5, Qiao-jie's prophetic picture shows a deserted village inn, where a beauty sits spinning.
In Chapter 15, during Qin Ke-qing's funeral procession, Bao-yu encounters a country girl weaving at her loom, and "could not restrain his feelings, wishing he could get down from the carriage and follow her." (*Jiaxu edition*)[7]

The image of the "spinning maiden" thus forms a clear correspondence between the two scenes.

In the same chapter, there is also a Prince Bei-Jing thread, whose symbolic meaning will be further revealed later in this study.

Therefore, though Qiao-jie has no lines, her inclusion in the main register shows that her projectional function outweighs her narrative presence.

Through the imagery of the Seventh Night and the rural weaving scene, she becomes part of the Yang Guifei chain, serving as a subtle yet essential link in the projectional system of Dai-yu and Bao-chai.

3. Those Who Reflect Dai-yu in Emotional and Ambiguous Relationships

At another end of the projectional system, the author arranges a group of female characters who share ambiguous emotional ties with Bao-yu.
Their identities differ, yet together they form an extended chain beyond the "union of Chai and Dai":

- **Jin Chuan'er**, through the imagery of white and snow, the funeral garment connection, and the transference of diction, is incorporated into the "Chai–Dai projection" chain. Her being called "Prince Bei-Jing's concubine" links her to the palace narrative.
- **Xi-ren**, as a "replica of Bao-chai," inherits the *"Flower That Understands Speech"* motif and, through birthday parallels, objects, and sexual intimacy, is likewise drawn into the same projection system.

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[7] Zhi Yanzhai's Re-Commentary on *The Story of the Stone* (Jiaxu version), People's Literature Publishing House, January 2010 edition.

- **Ping’er**, through the ambiguous coronation with “Twin Autumn Orchids” and the phonetic link between *Ping* and *Pin*, becomes one of Dai-yu’s reflections. Her role connects to the cultural motif of “entering the palace as a destined mission.”

- **Xiang-yun**, embodying the sublimation of a “third incarnation,” carries celestial symbols, transgressive attire, and the unicorn cipher, signifying an ascent from mortal affection to transcendent enlightenment.

Together, these four form an intricate network of emotional projections, a structure that extends and complements the “union of Chai and Dai.”
Through this broader system, the author achieves his narrative intention by means of projectional design.

a. Jin Chuan'er: Bao-chai’s Shadow and the Hidden Thread of the “Union of Chai and Dai”

1) Substitute and Shadow: The White/Snow Chain and the Garment Motif

In Chapter 7, Jin Chuan'er’s first appearance is annotated in *The Story of the Stone* (*Jiaxu edition*):
“Jin Chuan'er and Bao-chai mirror one another: marvelous!”

This commentary directly reveals their shadow relationship.

Subsequent details in the novel further confirm this link.

Jin Chuan'er’s family name, Bai, means “white,” while Bao-chai’s surname Xue means “snow.” Both belong to the white-color system.

In Chapter 30, Lady Wang expels Jin Chuan'er after her ambiguous conversation with Bao-yu and orders Chuan’er’s mother, “Old Mrs. Bai,” to take her away.

In the same chapter, Jin Chuan'er says to Bao-yu, half-jokingly,
“A golden hairpin fell into the well, what is yours is yours.”

This line echoes Bao-chai’s prophecy,
“A golden hairpin buried in the snow.”

Afterward, Jin Chuan'er, humiliated at being expelled, throws herself into a well.

When Lady Wang worries about Jin Chuan'er's funeral clothes, Bao-chai offers her own new clothes.

This detail makes clothing a symbolic medium linking Jin Chuan'er's death with Bao-chai's identity, casting her as Bao-chai's shadow projection within the narrative.

2) "Unique in the World, Peerless in Heaven": The Transference of Diction

In Chapter 43, during Jin Chuan'er's memorial, Ming-yan murmurs:
"Of course she was that one, unique in the world, peerless in heaven, so clever and graceful a sister."

Such diction carries specific significance in the novel:
In Chapter 65, when Xing-er introduces Lin Dai-yu and Xue Bao-chai to the You sisters, he uses nearly identical words,
"Rare in heaven, unmatched on earth."

The reuse of this diction symbolically integrates the marginal maid Jin Chuan'er into the Dai–Chai projection system.

3) Prince Bei-Jing's Concubine: The Palace Undertext

In Chapter 43, when Bao-yu holds a memorial for Jin Chuan'er, he pretends that "Prince Bei-Jing has lost a concubine."

On the surface, this is an excuse to conceal his behavior, yet through the narrative frame of "prince and concubine," the story elevates the death of a maid to the level of palatial symbolism.

Prince Bei-Jing is not merely a secondary figure; he functions as a nodal point of imperial allegory.
Through this fabricated pretext, Jin Chuan'er's death is imbued with courtly significance, transforming her from a servant into a subtle yet essential link within the Dai–Chai projection network.

b. Xi-ren: A Multi-layered Projection

1) Xi-ren as Bao-chai's Replica and the "Flower That Understands Speech" Motif

The relationship between Xi-ren and Bao-chai as mirrored figures is also noted by Zhi Yanzhai in *The Story of the Stone* (*Jiaxu edition*):

“Qing has Dai-yu’s spirit; Xi-ren is Bao-chai’s replica.”

The novel itself confirms this through its motifs and details.

Bao-chai is repeatedly compared to Yang Guifei, forming the “Yang Guifei–Bao-chai” motif chain.
In Chapter 19, the title *“On a Tender Night of Passion, the Flower That Understands Speech; On a Quiet Day, the Jade That Gives Off Fragrance”* introduces the phrase *“Flower That Understands Speech,”* referring to Xi-ren.

The Tang Emperor Xuanzong once likened Yang Guifei to such a *“Flower That Understands Speech,”* as recorded in Wang Renyu’s *Anecdotes of the Kaiyuan and Tianbao Eras*.[8]

By adopting this allusion, *Dream of the Red Chamber* embeds Xi-ren within the Yang Guifei chain, extending Bao-chai’s projectional thread.

2) The Coincidence of Birthdays

In Chapter 62, Bao-yu remarks that Xi-ren shares the same birthday as Lin Dai-yu.
The characters’ birth dates are deliberately patterned, an alignment that gives Xi-ren a dual connection: she is both Bao-chai’s replica and Dai-yu’s echo, thus woven into the double projection system.

3) The Palace Undertext

The waistband originally gifted by Prince Bei-Jing to Jiang Yuhan eventually ends up tied around Xi-ren’s waist by Bao-yu in Chapter 28.

Through this seemingly casual detail, Xi-ren too becomes entangled in the palatial symbolism represented by the prince, marking her as another node in the hidden “Northern Serenity” line.

4) Physical Depiction

Xi-ren’s sexual relationship with Bao-yu is explicitly portrayed in Chapter 6 of the novel, thus materializing her “projection” identity at the bodily level. This is the only projection in the Chai–Dai system realized through physical experience.

Thus Xi-ren’s narrative role encompasses three dimensions:

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8 Wang Renyu (Five Dynasties period), *Anecdotes of the Kaiyuan and Tianbao Eras*, juan 3.

1. Through the *Flower That Understands Speech* motif, she inherits the "Yang Guifei–Bao-chai" cultural lineage;

2. Through birthdays and objects, she enters both the Chai–Dai and palace frameworks;

3. Through physical intimacy, she becomes the sole character whose projection is embodied.

While Xi-ren's multiplicity of symbols might seem to weaken her individuality, this overlap is precisely the author's intent: through overlapping projections, he creates moments when the system reveals itself, inviting readers to perceive the hidden relations among the characters.

c. Ping'er: Phonetic Echo and Ambiguous Coronation

1) A Special Status

Among the many maids in *Dream of the Red Chamber*, Ping'er's position is uniquely elevated.
She is intelligent, capable, and deeply trusted by Lady Wang Xi-feng.
She appears in four chapter titles, unprecedented among the servants.
When Wang Xi-feng falls ill, Ping'er assists Jia Tan-chun in reforming household affairs, demonstrating competence far beyond her station.

2) The Ambiguity of "Twin Autumn Orchids"

In Chapter 44, Bao-yu adorns Ping'er's hair with "Twin Autumn Orchids"—a flower that traditionally symbolizes conjugal unity.
The author's deliberate choice to have Bao-yu personally perform this tender, almost ceremonial act serves as a symbolic coronation, momentarily elevating Ping'er to the same symbolic rank as Dai-yu and Bao-chai.

3) The Phonetic Mirror

In Wu-dialect regions, final nasal sounds often merge; *Ping* and *Pin* become nearly homophonous.
"Pin'er" (顰儿) is Bao-yu's affectionate name for Lin Dai-yu.
Moreover, the character *Pin* is linked to Xi Shi, who represents the cultural motif of "sacrifice for the nation."
Thus, the name *Ping'er*, through phonetic resonance, becomes a linguistic reflection of Dai-yu and subtly connects to the Xi Shi–Palace Mission motif.

4) The Birthday Hint

In Chapter 62, Ping'er shares the same birthday as Bao-yu.
Through the maid Si'er's remark, "Those born on the same day are meant to be husband and wife," the narrative lightly but meaningfully strengthens their ambiguous bond.
This hint of fate turns Ping'er from a loyal aide into a symbolic projection of destined union.

Therefore, Ping'er is far more than a secondary character.
Her name mirrors Dai-yu's nickname *Pin'er*. Her floral coronation and shared birthday endow her with conjugal symbolism.
Her support of Tan-chun's reform foreshadows her broader structural role.
Through these layered designs, the author quietly inscribes Ping'er into the narrative chain of Dai-yu–Xi Shi–Palace Mission, making her a crucial figure within the projection system.

d. Shi Xiang-yun: Symbols of Immortality and the "Third Incarnation"

1) Symbols of the Immortal and the Union of Literature and Valor

Shi Xiang-yun is repeatedly associated with celestial imagery: Sun Wukong, cranes, and the qilin all thread through her portrayal.

In Chapter 49, Dai-yu teases her, saying "The Monkey King has arrived," and the text describes her as "wasp-waisted, ape-backed, with the grace of a crane and the form of a mantis."

In Chapter 50, She Xiang-yun's poem includes the line "At the Stone Tower, the crane sleeps in leisure," and in Chapter 78, "By the cold pond, the crane's shadow crosses," both repeatedly invoking the cran**e** as a symbol.

In Chapter 31, she finds Bao-yu's lost golden qilin, which perfectly matches the small qilin she wears, forming a complementary pair of yin and yang.

Combined with the fifth chapter's song *"Joy Amid Sorrow"*:
"Magnanimous and open-hearted, never entangled in the passions of men and women"
and her self-description in Chapter 49: "A true scholar is naturally romantic,"
along with Dai-yu's remark in Chapter 57 that she possesses "the courage of Jing Ke and Nie Zheng,"
it is clear that Xiang-yun combines the refinement of a civil scholar (crane) with the valor of a warrior (qilin).

(According to *Qingbai Leichao*, the robe of a first-rank civil official bore the crane, while that of a first-rank military official bore the qilin.)

She is thus endowed with a transcendent, immortal quality that exceeds the ordinary bounds of the mortal world.

2) Hierarchical Hints in Costume Colors

Xiang-yun's attire frequently features ritual colors such as "goose yellow" and "autumn-fragrance."
In Chapter 50, she is described wearing
"a cap of crimson felt trimmed with golden goose-yellow silk and lined with red sable, and inside, a short silver-mouse jacket beneath a narrow-sleeved robe of autumn-fragrance color embroidered with five-colored dragons."

These hues and motifs belong to the imperial palette.
In the early Qing, yellow and its related shades such as autumn-fragrance, beige, goose yellow, and willow yellow were all forbidden to commoners.
Through this transgression of dress hierarchy, the author endows Xiang-yun with dual symbolism: palatial and celestial, elevating her beyond the domestic sphere into a higher allegorical realm.

3) The Xiang River Imagery

In Chapter 37, when Tan-chun explains Dai-yu's title "Fairy of the Xiao-Xiang," she refers to the legend of the concubines Ehuang and Nüying, whose tears stained the bamboo after their husband's death, thus binding Dai-yu to the Xiang Concubine motif.
In Chapter 5, Xiang-yun's prophetic poem reads:
"The waters of Xiang flow away, the clouds of Chu drift apart."
Her song includes:
"The clouds scatter above Gaotang, the waters of Xiang run dry."
As Ehuang and Nüying became goddesses of the Xiang River after death, Xiang-yun is naturally absorbed into the Xiang Concubine narrative chain.
Thus, she and Dai-yu correspond through the shared cultural motif of the Weeping Concubines of Xiang.

4) "Drunk Among Flowers" and the Yang Guifei Chain

In Chapter 62, one of Xiang-yun's most famous scenes shows her drunkenly sleeping among peonies on a stone terrace.

In Chapter 63, during the drawing of the flower lots, she draws the "Begonia" lot, whose verse reads:
"I fear only that by night the flower will fall asleep."
Dai-yu immediately suggests replacing "by night" with "on cold stone," echoing Xiang-yun's drunken scene.

This lot poem originates from Su Shi's "Begonia," a flower that had long been associated with Yang Guifei.
Earlier, in Chapter 5, the painting "Spring Slumber of the Begonia" hanging in Qin Ke-qing's chamber likewise alludes to Yang Guifei's "Spring Slumber."
Hence, Xiang-yun's drunken sleep among flowers is not incidental—it is deliberately woven into the Yang Guifei chain through the imagery of the begonia.

5) The Golden Qilin and the White-Haired Double Stars

In Chapter 31, when Xiang-yun retrieves Bao-yu's lost golden qilin and matches it with her own smaller one, their union forms a yin–yang pair.
The chapter title, *"The Qilin Brings Together the White-Haired Double Stars,"* places Xiang-yun within the mythic framework of the Cowherd and the Weaver Girl—the legendary "double stars" of Chinese folklore—and echoes the scene in *The Palace of Eternal Life* where Yang Guifei and Emperor Xuanzong swear eternal fidelity.

The musical tune *"The Yellow Oriole"* used in this scene also corresponds to Bao-chai's maid *Huang Ying-er* (literally "Yellow Oriole"), further intertwining Xiang-yun with the Yang Guifei motif.

6) The Literary Resonance of the Begonia Poetry Club

In the *Begonia Poetry Club* scene in Chapter 37, Xiang-yun, Dai-yu, and Bao-chai share the same poetic arena.
Dai-yu's poem wins Bao-yu's admiration; Bao-chai's poem is judged first by the hostess Li Wan; and Xiang-yun, arriving late, composes two poems in a single burst, winning universal praise.
Their balanced positions in this literary contest imply that, in the author's vision, their symbolic and artistic significance stand on equal footing.

7) Ambiguous Interactions and the Projection Chain

Though known for her bold temperament, Xiang-yun is not detached from the realm of tender emotion.

In Chapter 21, Bao-yu enters the room where Dai-yu and Xiang-yun are sleeping together. There he tucks in Xiang-yun's quilt, washes his face with her water, and even asks her to comb his hair. Dai-yu, sharing the room, feels no jealousy.

This scene suggests both a subtle intimacy between Bao-yu and Xiang-yun and Xiang-yun's unique position within the projectional network.

Taken together, Xiang-yun embodies the third incarnation in the projectional system, echoing the immortal vow between the Divine Jade Attendant (Shen-ying) and the Crimson Pearl Fairy (Jiang-zhu) by the "Stone of Three Lives."

This "third life" design is not mere narrative variety—it expresses the author's deep longing for eternal companionship.

Xiang-yun, therefore, is written as a transcendent figure, both literary and martial, human and divine, serving as an emotional and spiritual resolution of unfulfilled love from previous lives.

Hence, Jin Chuan'er, Xi-ren, Ping'er, and Xiang-yun together form a subsidiary chain of Dai-yu's projections, those who are linked to Bao-yu through ambiguous affection.

They extend and complete the structure of the "union of Chai and Dai," making the projectional system a complex interplay of reflection and resonance.

Summary to Part I

"Projection" serves simultaneously as a method of character construction, a narrative cipher, and the core symbolic mechanism through which *Dream of the Red Chamber* carries its historical and allegorical weight.

By fragmenting the traits of prototype figures and distributing them among numerous female characters, the author creates a layered, mirror-like texture within the narrative.
Through the continual processes of reflection, overlap, and displacement, readers are guided to perceive the novel's embedded logic of decipherment.

This structure of projection and mirroring enables the text to reveal itself in the act of reading, laying the groundwork for the following discussion on prototype and intertext.

Part II. The Cipher Text of *Dream of the Red Chamber*

The previous section demonstrated how *Dream of the Red Chamber* disassembles and recombines the traits of its characters through a "projectional" structure. Yet this puzzle-like composition is not a mere narrative game; it points toward a hidden prototype of truth. In other words, the projections are the technique, but the reconstructed whole is the solution to the cipher.

To follow this path of decipherment, one must move from the inner text to the outer world, searching for contemporary documents that secretly resonate with *Dream of the Red Chamber*.

This section centers on *Reminiscences of the Shadow Plum Hermitage* (*Yingmei'an Yiyu*)[9] (hereafter referred to as "*Reminiscences*"), viewing it as the cipher text through which one may enter the narrative system of *Dream of the Red Chamber*. On the surface, Reminiscence is a record of mourning, yet within its depictions of characters, temporal narration, and symbolic imagery, it conceals a series of correspondences with the novel.

Specifically, this section will examine:

• How the elegiac writing in the "cipher text," through the intertextual structure of Crimson Pearl and Divine Jade, provides a realistic counterpart to the allegorical system of *Dream of the Red Chamber*.

• How the historical figures and narrative fragments within it supply factual bases and symbolic clues for the novel's characterization.

• How its depictions of painting, cuisine, and artifacts reflect, through realistic detail, the spiritual world of the novel.

• How its chronological dislocations and temporal anomalies reveal the true historical period concealed beneath the surface of narration.

A. Jiang-zhu and Shen-ying: Symbolic Recursion and the Projection of Reality

(Jiang-zhu = Crimson Pearl Fairy; Shen-ying = Divine Jade Attendant)

1. From Jiang-zhu to the "Needle Goddess"

The opening chapter of *Dream of the Red Chamber* recounts:

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9 The Complete Works of Mao Pijiang, Phoenix Publishing House, 2016

“By the banks of the Spirit River in the Western Heaven, beside the Stone of Three Lives, there grew a single plant of Crimson Pearl Grass. It was daily watered with sweet dew by the Divine Attendant of the Crimson Palace, whereby the grass gained long life... It later shed its vegetal form and took human shape, becoming a maiden.”

Lin Dai-yu is thus identified as the Crimson Pearl Fairy, who vows to repay the Divine Attendant with a lifetime of tears.

Meanwhile, *Shiyi Ji* (*Records of Anomalies)*, an early-fourth-century collection of mythic tales[10]records that Emperor Cao Pi’s concubine Xue Lingyun, famed for her needlework, was known as the “Needle Goddess.” When she bid farewell to her parents, she wept so profusely that her tears, collected in a jade vessel, congealed into blood-colored pearls, thus giving rise to the legend of the “red tears.”

The name *Jiang-zhu* itself literally means “red tears” (*jiang* = crimson, *zhu* = pearl or tear). In Chapter 52 of *Dream of the Red Chamber*, Qing-wen displays extraordinary skill in repairing Bao-yu’s gold-threaded cloak, echoing the “Needle Goddess” image of the red tears legend. Qing-wen is regarded as a projection of Lin Dai-yu, while Dai-yu is the human incarnation of Jiang-zhu, the Crimson Pearl Fairy.

Thus emerges the symbolic chain:
Red Tears → Needle Goddess → Qing-wen → Dai-yu → Jiang-zhu.

This chain reveals not only the novel’s inner logic of symbolism but also provides the key reference for the real-world projection between Dong Xiaowan, the “Needle Goddess,” and Mao Pijiang, the “Shen-ying Attendant.”

2. The Needle Goddess and Dong Xiaowan

Mao Pijiang explicitly calls Dong Xiaowan the unparalleled “Needle Goddess” in *Reminiscences*, his prose collection mourning her:

“Her embroidery, cutting, and gold-thread weaving surpass all. The Needle Goddess, in her divine art, has had no equal since ancient times.”

He also writes that redeeming her from the courtesan world cost him “ten thousand measures of heart’s blood.”

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[10] Wang Jia (Eastern Jin dynasty), *Records of Anomalies* (*Shiyi ji*), juan 7

After entering Mao's household, Dong Xiaowan's reflections in *Reminiscences* reveal her spiritual transformation:

"It was as though I had suddenly escaped from ten thousand acres of fiery clouds, finding rest in the realm of coolness. Looking back upon five years of dust and turmoil, it seemed all a dream and a prison."

She even vows:

"I shall exhaust my strength in devotion to my husband. If he lives, I shall live in his life; should calamity befall him, I would have no refuge left in this world of war."

When compared with the mythic relation of "Divine Jade Attendant watering Crimson Pearl," their fates form an intertextual mirroring: Mao Pijiang becomes the Divine Attendant, while Dong Xiaowan becomes the Crimson Pearl, devoting her life to reciprocating an act of salvation.

Reminiscences records that in the early summer of 1639 (the year ji-mao), Mao first met Dong Xiaowan, then sixteen by nominal age, thus born in 1624, the Year of the Rat.
This seemingly minor detail corresponds to Bao-yu's "Little Mouse" fable in *Dream of the Red Chamber*, subtly incorporating Dong Xiaowan's historical identity into the novel's projectional system.

3. "Shen-ying" and "Ying Stone": An Intertextual Parallel

The name Shen-ying ("Divine Jade Attendant") in *Dream of the Red Chamber* also alludes to Mao Pijiang's personal obsession.
Mao called himself a "stone fanatic."
In his *Record of the Cloud Offering*, he confesses:

"My fondness for stones is like a drunkard's fondness for wine…."

In *Explanation of the Ying Stone*, he recalls:

"After the Salt Garrison disaster of the Yi-you year, I fell gravely ill and wrote four farewell poems from my sickbed. My father brought back from Guangdong a long, slender Ying Stone, nine feet tall, with peaks like a jade maiden. Of all things, I could forsake everything but this stone."

For Mao, the Ying Stone was his very "life root." This fixation strongly recalls Bao-yu's "Magic Jade," likewise called his "life root." If we treat *ying* (瑛) and *ying* (英) as phonetic variants, the

title “Shen-ying” (“Divine Jade Attendant,” with *jade* referring to the sacred form of stone in Chinese symbolism) may well derive from Mao’s stone obsession.

Similarly, the surname “Dong” (董) visually resembles “grass across a thousand miles” (千里草), echoing the imagery of the Crimson Pearl Grass (Jiang-zhu).

Thus, from the Crimson Pearl Fairy to the Needle Goddess to the mirrored figures of Qing-wen and Dai-yu, *Dream of the Red Chamber* constructs a symbolic chain of “Crimson Pearl – Red Tears – Needle Goddess.” Through the relational mirroring of Qing-wen and Dai-yu, this becomes a narrative structure, a system that perpetually reflects itself.

In *Reminiscences*, this loop is projected into reality:
Mao Pijiang’s stone obsession and his “Ying Stone” as lifeline, mirror Bao-yu’s “Majic Jade”;
Dong Xiaowan, praised as the “Needle Goddess,” views Mao’s protection as salvation and vows her life in repayment.

Hence, *Dream of the Red Chamber* and *Reminiscences*, silently echo each other in symbolic structure:
mythic narrative and real-world love form mutual ciphers, turning the text itself into a mirror of “Crimson Pearl and Divine Jade.”

This intertextual relationship between *Reminiscences* and *Dream of the Red Chamber* will be examined in greater depth in the following section.

B. The Intertext between *Reminiscences* and *Dream of the Red Chamber*

1. Parallel Writing in Characters and Material Culture

a. Copying in Small Regular Script: Dai-yu’s Model Copying ↔ Lady Dong’s Imitations of Zhong and Wang

In Chapter 70 of *Dream of the Red Chamber*, Lin Dai-yu has her maid, Zi-juan, deliver to Bao-yu a scroll of “tiny regular script imitating Zhong (Zhong Yao) and Wang (Wang Xizhi) on oiled paper.”

This seemingly trivial detail finds a clear response in *Reminiscences*. Mao Pijiang writes:

“When Lady Dong first entered my household, ... she imitated the brush style of Zhong Yao. She greatly loved it and began copying it diligently. Later, she searched widely for the works of

Prefect Zhong to study from them ... She chose to practice *Stele of Cao E*, writing thousands of characters a day without a single error or omission."

The passage shows that Dong Xiaowan first studied the *small regular script* of Zhong Yao and later turned to Wang Xizhi's *Stele of Cao E*, demonstrating her mastery of classical calligraphic models and her sensitivity to their moral implications.

One is the fictional "Dai-yu copying models," the other the historical "Lady Dong imitating models." Both excel in Zhong and Wang's small regular script, revealing a deliberate correspondence the author establishes between fiction and history.

b. Names and Colors: *Bai* (White), *Qinglian* (Blue Lotus) ↔ The Lotus Imagery Chain

Reminiscences records:
"My deceased concubine Lady Dong was originally named *Bai* (meaning 'white'), styled *Xiaowan*, and later styled *Qinglian* (meaning 'blue lotus')."

In *Dream of the Red Chamber*, the characters *bai* (white) and *qing* (blue) carry notable poetic significance.

In Chapter 48, when Lin Dai-yu instructs Xiang-ling in poetry, the author uses Xiang-ling's remarks as a vehicle to express his own aesthetic preference. Through Xiang-ling's praise of the line, "When the sun sets, the rivers and lakes turn white; when the tide rises, heaven and earth turn blue," the narrative draws particular attention to the words "white" and "blue," which she likens to "olives weighing several thousand catties," underscoring their extraordinary expressive weight.

Further, in Chapter 63, when drawing flower lots, Dai-yu draws the lotus. People laugh, commenting,
"This is perfect. No one but Dai-yu is worthy of the furong (lotus)."

Thus Dai-yu is officially identified with the lotus. In classical usage, *lian* (lotus) and *furong* (hibiscus) were interchangeable names for the same flower.

In Chapter 78, a maid reports that Qing-wen has been assigned as the Flower Spirit of the Lotus. Dong Xiaowan's style name Qinglian (*Blue Lotus*) thus coincides with the lotus identities of Dai-yu and Qing-wen, forming an intertextual echo between reality and fiction.

c. Flower Dew and Delicacies: Lady Dong's Culinary Skill ↔ The Novel's Secret Recipes

In *Reminiscences*, Mao Pijiang offers extensive praise for Dong Xiaowan's art of making flower dew:
"From any colored, fragrant blossom, she would gather the stamens when first opening and steep them; over a year the fragrance, taste, and color remained unchanged… The most exquisite is the autumn begonia dew; though begonias have no scent, this dew alone condenses fragrance to bloom forth… After wine, she would present dozens of kinds, five colors floating in white porcelain, clearing intoxication and thirst, hard for the 'immortal palms with golden stems' to rival."

This description not only demonstrates Dong Xiaowan's refined craftsmanship and sensory precision but also connects her work to the regional tradition of flower-dew production around Tiger Hill in Suzhou, her native place, which is also depicted in the novel as Lin Dai-yu's hometown.

Correspondingly, *Dream of the Red Chamber* repeatedly depicts flower-dew and floral products. The most typical is Bao-chai's recipe for Cold Fragrance Pills:

"One must gather twelve taels each of the white peony stamens of spring, the white lotus stamens of summer, the white hibiscus stamens of autumn, and the white plum stamens of winter… also twelve qian each of the rain from the day of Rain Water, the dew from the day of White Dew, the frost from the day of Frost Descent, and the snow from the day of Minor Snow… roll into longan-sized pills, store in an old earthen jar, and bury at the roots of flowers."

The formula juxtaposes the "four seasons' flower stamens" with the "waters of the four solar nodes," using the process of burial for natural fermentation. This complex alchemical design parallels Dong Xiaowan's flower-dew technique in both method and spirit.

Furthermore, *Reminiscences* records Dong's "ingenious transformations," in which she turns simple ingredients into refined delicacies: from vegetables, fruits, and spiced beans she creates condiments of distinctive flavor, transforming the commonplace into dishes of rare elegance.

Correspondingly, Chapter 62 of the novel features eggplant relish (*qie-xiang*): eggplant flesh, chicken breast, fragrant mushrooms, bamboo shoots, and dried fruits are finely minced, simmered down with chicken broth, blended with sesame oil and dregs oil, and sealed in a jar for storage. This meticulous technique parallels Dong's culinary skill, the shared spirit is "turning the ordinary into the rare."

Hence, from Dong's flower dew to Bao-chai's Cold Fragrance Pills, from her ingenious small dishes to the novel's eggplant relish, the two texts engage in subtle correspondence through their

gathering of stamens, collection of dew, and pursuit of sensory perfection. The novel's remarkably detailed depictions of gastronomy likely stem from actual observation of such refined practices, transforming lived culinary experience into part of its narrative texture.

d. Tea Ware and Allusions: Miao-yu's "Jia" & "Xi" ↔ *Reminiscences*'s "Wine Poured into a Xi-Jia"

In Chapter 41, when Miao-yu serves her "private tea" to Bao-chai and Dai-yu, she deliberately brings out exceedingly rare vessels:
"One cup had a side handle, with three clerical-script characters engraved on it: '*Ban-Pao-Jia*'; below in small characters: 'A treasure of Prince Wang of Jin'; 'Seen by Su Shi of Meishan in the fifth year of Yuanfeng, fourth month, in the secret storehouse.' Miao-yu poured the *Jia* for Bao-chai. For Dai-yu she used the '*Dian-xi Qiao*.'"

Echoing this, *Reminiscences* records "wine poured into a *xi-jia*," and quotes Su Shi: "Dividing none, jade bowls lift Emei."

Thus the pairing of *xi* and *jia*, together with Su Shi's inscription, forms a shared cultural trope in both texts.

A deeper layer of wordplay lies behind the names of these vessels. Miao-yu's tea utensils—the *pao* (瓟) and *jia* (斚)—together with the inscription "A treasure of Prince Wang of Jin," allude to the story of Wang Kai and the wealthy Shi Chong competing in extravagance during the Western Jin. Graphically, the character *pao* (瓟) contains *bao* (苞), recalling the name of Shi Chong's father, Shi Bao; while *jia* (斚), composed of *dou* (斗) and two *kou* (口), may suggest "two mouths in contention," symbolizing the rivalry between Wang Kai and Shi Chong.

The tragedy of Shi Chong and his beloved Lü Zhu reverberates in the novel as well: one of Lin Dai-yu's "Five Beauties" elegies mourns Lü Zhu. The same allusion appears elsewhere in Mao Pijiang's writings, linking the emotional and historical threads of both worlds.

Hence, the cultural allusions embedded in these vessels are reinterpreted and reassigned within *Dream of the Red Chamber*, creating an interwoven network of symbols that circulate between history and fiction.

e. Poetry Societies and "Grand Prospect": The Garden Poetry Clubs ↔ The Ideal of "Forming a Grand Prospect of an Age"

Mao Pijiang writes in *Reminiscences*:

“For years I have wished to collect the poetry of the Four Tangs, to purchase complete collections, gather anecdotes, and assemble commentaries, arranging by author and year, and carefully evaluating each collection; to retrieve what has been lost and form a grand prospect for an age.”

This is not only a scholar’s ambition but also a cultural ideal centered on the compilation and evaluation of poetry. What he envisions is to realize a “grand prospect of poetry,” gathering the literary achievements of an entire era through a single hand.

In *Dream of the Red Chamber*, this ideal is transposed into fiction through the Grand View Garden’s poetry societies. The Begonia Poetry Club, the Chrysanthemum Poetry Contest, and the Peach Blossom Society unfold in succession, with Dai-yu, Bao-chai, and Xiang-yun each displaying distinctive poetic styles. The author, with a single pen, orchestrates a chorus of voices, composing nearly a hundred original poems that together resemble a grand literary ensemble.

This sequence not only marks the pinnacle of collective poetic composition within the novel but also serves as an artistic projection of Mao Pijiang’s cultural vision: to “form a grand prospect of an age.”

2. Chen Yuan-yuan and Xiang-ling/Xing Xiu-yan: The Beginning of the Cipher

a. The Paradoxical Opening of *Reminiscences*

Reminiscences is Mao Pijiang’s work in memory of Dong Xiaowan, yet at the very beginning it gives a lengthy account of his meeting and parting with Chen Yuan-yuan. From the viewpoint of memorial writing alone, this is perplexing, but if *Reminiscences* is read as a cipher text, its arrangement is logical.

Just as *Dream of the Red Chamber* does not begin directly with the love between Bao-yu and Dai-yu but reveals the tragic theme through Zhen Ying-lian (Xiang-ling), Mao likewise begins *Reminiscences* with Chen Yuan-yuan, interweaving personal memory and historical allegory to establish an intertext between reality and fiction. Read alongside *Dream of the Red Chamber*, this paradox at the opening becomes the first clue of the cipher text.

b. The Background of Xiang-ling (Zhen Ying-lian)

In *Dream of the Red Chamber*, the first woman to appear is Zhen Ying-lian (later renamed Xiang-ling, also called Qiu-ling). Her fate is torturous: kidnapped as a child, later sold to Feng Yuan, then seized by Xue Pan.

In Chapter 5 her prophecy reads:
"Sharing a root with the lotus, one stalk and fragrance; her life's encounters are truly lamentable. Since two places produced a lonely tree, her fragrant soul returns to her homeland."

The "two places, one lonely tree" combine graphically to form the character *gui* (桂, composed of the radical *mu* 木 "tree" atop *tu* 土 "earth"), a name-cipher hinting at her tragic fate.

In Chapter 1, the bald monk comments on Zhen Yin-lian: "Fated, yet without luck, bringing calamity upon her parents," further revealing her destiny: the tragedy concerns not only the individual but also implicates the family.

c. Chen Yuan-yuan's Fate in Parallel with Xiang-ling

Chen Yuan-yuan's life trajectory parallels Xiang-ling's prophecy and the monk's remark. A famed actress, she was first seized and taken to the capital by Tian Hongyu, then entered Wu Sangui's residence, and was later taken by Liu Zongmin. Three turns of displacement, much like Zhen Ying-lian's repeated renamings and resales.

Wu Sangui, angered by her abduction, "in a rage lifted his helmet," led the Qing army through the pass, thereby "implicating all the parents and children under heaven." This corresponds in meaning to the monk's words "bringing calamity upon her parents," making the Xiang-ling–Yuan-yuan mirrored tragedy a historical projection.

This intertext also appears in names. Xiang-ling's prophecy forms *gui* (桂). In the novel this is further hinted at in Xue Pan's legal wife Xia Jin-gui: *Jin* (gold) alludes to the Qing regime; *Gui* points directly to Wu Sangui; and *Xia* evokes Huaxia (China). These three layers combine into a refined name-cipher, binding fictional narrative to historical implication and secretly linking Xiang-ling's personal tragedy with the national tragedy triggered by Chen Yuan-yuan.

d. The Pomegranate Imagery: The Weaving of Chen Yuan-yuan and Xiang-ling

Beyond parallel fates, Chen Yuan-yuan and Xiang-ling also correspond in concrete imagery. In *Reminiscences*, Mao records an appointment with Chen Yuan-yuan to "admire pomegranates together at Tiger Hill in early summer," yet it was never realized due to upheaval.

In Dream of the Red Chamber, the title of Chapter 62, "Simple Xiang-ling Loosens the Pomegranate Skirt," places Xiang-ling within the pomegranate imagery.

Xiang-ling's "loosening out of feeling" is especially symbolic: when her pomegranate skirt is

soiled, Bao-yu resolves the matter and gives her another one of the same kind. While changing, Xiang-ling shows no hesitation at Bao-yu's presence. In a context of strict propriety, this is rare, showing a deliberately crafted ambiguous tension.

More intriguing still, Bao-yu finally buries together the "Couple Orchids" that Xiang-ling gathered and his own "Twin Water Caltrops." Both symbolize conjugal bond, and the act of "burying," echoing the "feeling" in the chapter title, reveals the destiny between Xiang-ling and Bao-yu as fated yet not united.

e. Xing Xiu-yan and the Red Plum: A Compensatory Rewriting

Dream of the Red Chamber does not end Chen Yuan-yuan's tragic course. Instead, through the projection structure it provides a literary compensation. Xiang-ling has another projection in the novel: Xing Xiu-yan.

Chen Yuan-yuan's original surname was Xing. In *Reminiscences*, Mao records his first encounter: "She was understated yet full of charm, graceful and slow; when dressed in pepper-brown silk with a back glance at her Xiang skirt, truly like a solitary luan amid mist." She sang the Yiqiang piece "Red Plum," her voice "like clouds emerging from a peak, like pearls rolling in a tray," making Mao exclaim that it "made one want to become immortal or die."

The name Xiu-yan (*mist from a peak*) echoes this description. And that "Red Plum" also receives a response in the novel:

In Chapter 50, Xiu-yan's sole poem is "On the Red Plum Blossom." The red plum imagery thus bridges fiction and history, granting Chen Yuan-yuan literary rebirth in the novel.

Unlike Xiang-ling's tragic fate, Xiu-yan displays talent in the poetry club and enjoys a marriage to Xue Ke that is explicitly ideal: "Xue Ke is unmarried; look at the two, a pair made by heaven and earth" (Chapter 57). Her happy ending constitutes a compensatory rewriting of Chen Yuan-yuan's life.

Thus, the fates of Yuan-yuan–Xiang-ling–Xiu-yan mirror one another: the pomegranate signifies worldly sorrow; the red plum carries the continuation of the soul.

Therefore, the "Chen Yuan-yuan section" of *Reminiscences* is not superfluous; it is deliberately laid out as the prelude to reading the novel as cipher. Chen Yuan-yuan's drifting and renaming are refracted into Xiang-ling's tragic fate; Chen Yuan-yuan's unfulfilled bond finds its lodging in Xiu-yan's happy end. Xiang-ling and Xiu-yan—one sad, one joyful—jointly become Chen Yuan-

yuan's double incarnation in the novel: one as the reappearance of historical tragedy, the other as the ideal of literary compensation. In this way, *Reminiscences* and *Dream of the Red Chamber* form a multi-layered mirror of Yuan-yuan–Xiang-ling–Xiu-yan, revealing the beginning of the cipher.

3. Fang Yizhi and Fang-guan: Fraternal Reflection and the Matchmaker's Incarnation

a. Fang-guan's Unique Status

Fang-guan was one of the twelve young actresses of the Jia household's Pear Fragrance Troupe; after the troupe was dispersed, she was assigned to Bao-yu's rooms. Yet she was neither adept at needlework nor skilled at ingratiation; frank and even headstrong, she clearly did not fit the typical maid's role, but still received Bao-yu's special favor: the two ate at the same table, drank from the same cup, played drinking games, and on Bao-yu's birthday night in Chapter 63, drunkenly slept on the same bed. This relationship clearly exceeds master–servant bounds and resembles that of brothers and confidants.

Notably, Bao-yu gave her a series of unconventional nicknames, ranging from the foreign-sounding *Wendu-lina* to the overtly martial *Yelü Xiongnu*, and even once had her dress as a boy, prompting others to exclaim that they looked "like a pair of twin brothers."

These gestures collectively foreground her gender-transgressive characterization, making such masculinized—or more precisely, gender-crossing—traits a key marker of her narrative design.

b. Name Hints and the "Fang/Fang (Fragrance)" Clue

In Chapter 63, Fang-guan claims to share the same surname *Hua* ("Flower") as Xi-ren, and in Chapter 19 the author specifically notes that Xi-ren's elder brother is named *Hua Zi-fang* ("the flower comes from fragrance"). This "Hua from Fang" clearly foregrounds the graph *fang* ("fragrance"). Coupled with the homophonic relation, *fang* (芳) can hint at *Fang* (方), suggesting that a character riddle is embedded in the naming.

Crucially, in Chapter 77 Fang-guan ultimately leaves with Zhi-neng'er to become a nun. This ending corresponds to Fang Yizhi's late-life tonsure as a monk, under the Dharma name Hongzhi. Both names share the character *zhi* (智).

Hence Fang-guan's identity goes beyond a stage name; her monastic ending is a literary projection of Fang Yizhi's life path. This correspondence will be further corroborated later in this study.

c. The Matchmaker's Double Reflection

At the opening of *Reminiscences*, Mao writes: "I met Mi-zhi, who said: 'There is a Qinhuai beauty. Lately, there is Shuangcheng, very young in years, her talent and beauty the foremost of the time.'"

Here Mi-zhi is Fang Yizhi, and Shuangcheng is Dong Xiaowan.

This shows it was Fang Yizhi who introduced Dong Xiaowan to Mao Pijiang— a real-life matchmaker. The two were intimate friends and of the same birth year. This makes the novel's description of Bao-yu and Fang-guan as "a pair of twin brothers" especially apt.

Moreover, in the novel, Fang-guan plays the dan (lead female) role, corresponding to Cui Ying-ying in *The Western Chamber*, yet the narrative deliberately gives her the symbolism of *Hongniang* (the go-between).

In Chapter 48, after Fang-guan is beaten by her foster-mother, She-yue jokes: "We have turned a Miss Ying-ying into a flogged Hongniang!" Later, it is precisely Fang-guan who arranges for Liu Wu-er, who resembles Dai-yu, to enter Bao-yu's rooms, further highlighting her matchmaking function.

Thus, Fang-guan in the novel and Fang Yizhi in reality, correspond in narrative function as matchmakers: one brings Liu Wu-er (a projection of Dai-yu) to Bao-yu; the other introduces Dong Xiaowan to Mao Pijiang.

This also reveals the mission of the projected figure Liu Wu-er: her appearance is not accidental but forms an intertextual line between Fang-guan and Fang Yizhi.

d. Fang-guan and the Cultural Code of Italian

In Chapter 63, Bao-yu says: "In the Western Sea, Florence is said to have the gemstone 'gold-star glass'; in their native tongue this is called Wendu-lina." Here "Wendu-lina" is the transliteration of aventurine in Italian, whose accuracy far exceeds the usual linguistic knowledge of the time.

Fang Yizhi maintained close relations with Jesuits such as Bi Fangji (Prospero Intorcetta) and Tang Ruowang (Johann Adam Schall von Bell), and was deeply familiar with Western learning and European languages, which very likely provided the channel for this foreign-language element.

Qingshigao · Biography of Fang Yizhi says he was "erudite and versatile, able to trace the origins and analyze the meanings of astronomy, geography, rites and music, pitch and number, sound and script, calligraphy and painting, medicine, and even techniques of valor," showing near-encyclopedic knowledge. Through such exchanges, he could have encountered Western linguistic culture, providing the novel with a rare foreign term.

Fang-guan being named "Wendu-lina" by Bao-yu is precisely the novel's presentation of Fang Yizhi's cross-cultural persona.

e. Comparison and Conclusion

The comparison between Fang-guan and Fang Yizhi reveals multiple layers of resonance between the novel and history:

- **Character and status:** Fang-guan is portrayed in a masculinized role and bonds with Bao-yu like a brother, while Fang Yizhi and Mao Pijiang, born in the same year, often addressed each other as brothers.
- **Life trajectory:** Fang-guan enters religion with Zhi-neng'er; Fang Yizhi receives the tonsure in late life under the Dharma name Hongzhi.
- **Cultural symbols:** A*venturine* appears as an Italian term in the novel, while Fang Yizhi maintained close ties with Western missionaries.
- **Matchmaking role:** Fang-guan arranges Liu Wu-er's entry into Bao-yu's rooms; Fang Yizhi introduces Dong Xiaowan to Mao Pijiang.

The key lies in the narrative strategy of gender and status displacement. Bao-yu once said, "Girls are made of water; men are made of mud." Within this value framework, the feminine symbolizes spirituality and purity. The author employs this logic to transform the historical friend Fang Yizhi into the "girl made of water," Fang-guan.

Therefore, *Dream of the Red Chamber* figuratively rewrites Fang Yizhi as Fang-guan, extending the projectional method through gender transformation. This clue indicates that Fang Yizhi's appearance in *Reminiscences* is not accidental but the result of deliberate ciphered writing, in which a real person is transfigured into a fictional character so that personal friendship attains literary rebirth.

Most importantly, through this process the author leads readers to recognize that *Reminiscences* is not merely a record of mourning, but the cipher text of *Dream of the Red Chamber,* a prototypal document concealing clues awaiting decipherment.

4. Gong Fengchang and the "Geng-yin" Puzzle

Gong Fengchang is Gong Dingzi (1615–1673); "Fengchang" was his official title, and his sobriquet was Zhilü. A late-Ming and early-Qing man of letters, he was ranked with Qian Qianyi and Wu Weiye as one of the "Three Masters of Jiangzuo."

In *Reminiscences*, Gong appears both as the friend who "set down the beginning and end of the concubine's story" for Mao and, twenty years later, as the one who repaid his "life-long debt" by composing *He Xinliang · Yingmei'an Yiyu*.

His association with Mao, the temporal contradictions in his writings, and his rhetorical choices in the elegy form are key clues for interpreting the "Geng-yin" question in *Reminiscences*.

a. The Contradiction between "Geng-yin" and the Recorded Year of Death

Mao claims that *Reminiscences* was written two months after Dong Xiaowan's death. Dong died in the first month of Shunzhi 8 (1651). The text repeatedly uses "last year," referring to 1650, the year Geng-yin (cyclical year of the Metal Tiger). More crucially, it mentions "last year, the third month," saying that on Mao's fortieth birthday Gong Fengchang "alone wrote the beginning and end of Dong Xiaowan's story, making several thousand words." If she had truly died in 1651, then the phrase "beginning and end" becomes paradoxical.

Further, Gong, twenty years later, composed an elegy for Dong and called it "a life-long debt." This suggests that the extant *Reminiscences* likely underwent later additions or revisions, with the displacement between 1650 (Geng-yin) and 1651 (Xin-mao) deliberately blurring the true chronology and leaving a temporal cipher.

b. *Dijing Pian* and *Lianchang Palace*: The Rhetoric

Mao says in *Reminiscences* that Gong's works "*Dijing Pian* and *Lianchang Palace* are incomparable."

Dijing Pian is Luo Binwang's grand poem on the splendor of the imperial capital; *Lianchang Palace* is Yuan Zhen's poem recalling Emperor Xuanzong and Yang Guifei.

To set the elegy that "records the concubine's story" alongside the rise and fall of the capital and the tragedy of the imperial consort clearly goes beyond private mourning, hinting that Dong Xiaowan's life has been drawn into the allegorical structure of dynastic prosperity and palace tragedy.

c. Xue Pan's "Geng Huang" Joke and the Anecdote of Wen Zhengming

In Chapter 26 of *Dream of the Red Chamber*, Xue Pan misreads "Tang Yin" as "Geng Huang," to general mockery. The joke seems trivial but hides an allusion. Wen Zhengming was born in a Geng-yin year and often inscribed "Only from Geng-yin do I descend," which those ignorant mistook as "Tang Yin." Xue Pan's "*geng huang*" joke mirrors this anecdote.

Notably, in this episode the surnames of Tang Yin, Shen Zhou, and Qiu Ying, three of the Four Masters of Wu, are mentioned, while the surname of Wen Zhengming is conspicuously omitted.

This absence is likely deliberate: a joke as cover, yet leaving behind the cipher "Geng-yin."

If so, the novel's hint is not "Tang Yin," but the Geng-yin year. This intertexts with the repeated Geng-yin (1650) in *Reminiscences*.

d. Gong's Elegy and the Question of "Separation in Life"

In Kangxi 9, Geng-xu winter (1670), Gong completed *He Xinliang · Yingmei'an Yiyu*, writing:

"*Reminiscences of the Shadow Plum Hermitage* had long lain on my desk; I do not know who took it away. Mao sent it again. As I opened it, I wept, recalling the past."

The lyric reads:

"How many matters lie within the blue sea and azure sky; hard to entrust a letter to the yellow dog...
I envy that in the empyrean even a broken mirror may yet be pawned. The double-phoenix girdle can be cut anew."

The "yellow dog delivering a letter" alludes to the *Yellow-Ears* tale recorded by the Jin writer, symbolizing the possibility of communication. The "broken mirror pawned" comes from the story of a shattered mirror that is later made whole again, implying reunion. Both tropes suggest connection and potential restoration.

If Dong had truly died, why does the elegy repeatedly speak of "sending letters" and "reunion"? Its tone leans more toward separation in life than parting by death.

This aligns with the ending of *Reminiscences*, in which Mao dreams that Xiaowan "was taken away by force," while Xiaowan says she "escaped by fortune."

The narrative abruptly ends, the time still set in "late spring of Geng-yin," reading more as an allegory of living separation than as a record of death.

e. Novel and History in Intertext

Thus, *Dream of the Red Chamber* uses Xue Pan's "*geng huang*" joke to encode Wen Zhengming's Geng-yin anecdote, turning *Geng-yin* into a hidden chronological cipher pointing to the puzzle beneath.

In other words, *Reminiscences* and *Dream of the Red Chamber* exhibit intertextual convergence on the motif of *Geng-yin*: the former leaves traces through displacement and ambiguity, while the latter plants clues through jest and omission. Together they form a temporal cipher text for interpretation.

This ultimately raises the key question: Did Dong Xiaowan truly die in the eighth year of the Shunzhi reign (1651), or is the repeated inscription of Geng-yin (1650) itself the life-and-death cipher Mao Pijiang intentionally left behind?

5. Word Puzzles and Poetic Allusions: From the *Cao'e Stele* to the *Songs of Chu*

Beyond temporal displacements, the riddles in *Reminiscences of the Shadow Plum Hermitage* also extend into the domains of language, calligraphy, and classical poetry.

a. The *Cao'e Stele* and the Tradition of Hidden Speech

In Chapter 78 of *Dream of the Red Chamber*, Lin Dai-yu remarks that Bao-yu's "*Elegy to the Hibiscus Spirit*" rivals the *Cao'e Stele*.

The stele, long celebrated for its cryptic phrasing and puzzle-like structure. Thus, Dai-yu's comparison is more than mere praise: it signals the novel's participation in a long tradition of encoded and allusive writing.

Reminiscences records that Dong Xiaowan "copied the *Cao'e Stele* daily, writing thousands of characters without a single slip," revealing her mastery of this very text. Bao-yu writes his eulogy in the style of a funerary inscription; Mao Pijiang memorializes Dong through a prose diary, one fictional, one real, both grounded in the *Cao'e Stele*'s lineage of veiled expression.

b. The *Songs of Chu* and the Poetic Imagination

Reminiscences notes that Xiaowan "loved most to read the *Songs of Chu*, Du Fu, and Li Shangyin."

The fantastic flora of *Li Sao* mirrors the enchanted plants that Bao-yu identifies in the Grand View Garden; the *Nine Songs*, with their invocations to the River God and Goddess of Xiang, prefigure Dai-yu's self-image as the "Consort of Xiaoxiang."

Meanwhile, Du Fu and Li Shangyin also echo in the novel. In Chapter 48, Dai-yu lists Du Fu among the essential poets when teaching Xiangling to compose poetry, her subtle alteration of Li Shangyin's verse in Chapter 40 ("Let the rain fall on the last lotus petals") exposes her latent affinity with Li's coded poetics.

Thus, from the *Cao'e Stele* to the *Songs of Chu* and Du Fu, Dong Xiaowan's literary taste becomes transmuted into narrative texture, providing evidence that *Dream of the Red Chamber* itself was written as a "literary cipher."

Summary: The Intertextual Design of *Reminiscences* and *Dream of the Red Chamber*

Across the parallels above, *Reminiscences of the Shadow Plum Hermitage* and *Dream of the Red Chamber* reveal an intricate web of reflection:

- From miniature calligraphy and color symbolism to flower dew and cuisine, Dong Xiaowan's daily pursuits were reimagined as the habits of Dai-yu and Bao-chai.
- From antique vessels to literary salons, Mao Pijiang's cultural ideal of "achieving a grand anthology" found new life in the poetic gatherings of the Grand View Garden.
- From Chen Yuanyuan, Fang Yizhi, to Gong Dingzi, Mao's contemporaries became the prototypes for the novel's characters and plotlines.
- From the Cao'e Stele to Li Shangyin's poetry, Dong Xiaowan's reading interests were reborn as the novel's stylistic DNA.

More subtly, *Reminiscences* not only forms multiple correspondences with *Dream of the Red Chamber* on the visible level, but also lays out a more concealed set of mirrors beneath the surface.

C. From Liu Xiang-lian to Dai-yu's *Five Songs on the Beauties*

This section of the study will explore how the author hints at his own emotional confession through the figure of Liu Xiang-lian, the "Second Master," and how Dong Xiaowan's hidden reflection is revealed through Dai-yu's Five Songs on the Beauties.

1. Liu Xiang-lian and Mao Pijiang: The Cipher of the "Second Master"

In *Reminiscences*, Mao Pijiang recalls how Dong Xiaowan followed him all the way, while he kept turning her away: "The lady, having no choice, covered her face and wept aloud as she departed."

When they met again, Mao "hardened his heart and parted from her, sending her back to Suzhou." He makes no attempt to conceal his own cold resolve.

Later, after Dong's death, he was overwhelmed with grief and lamented, "The blessings of my lifetime were spent within nine years, and those nine years exhausted them all." Those nine years mark the span from their first meeting to their final parting.

Correspondingly, in Chapter 66 of *Dream of the Red Chamber*, You San-jie falls in love with Liu Xiang-lian, yet, after he coldly breaks off the engagement, she takes her own life. Xiang-lian, remorseful, takes the tonsure as a monk.

Liu Xiang-lian and Jia Bao-yu are both addressed as "Second Master"; their shared title suggests a structural projection between the two characters.

The novel portrays Liu Xiang-lian as frank and chivalrous, untroubled by trifles, with a past colored by romantic entanglements among cultured artistes, and a fondness for taking roles in stage performances. This temperament closely parallels Mao Pijiang's own: sociable, fond of amateur acting, and inclined to form friendships with gifted women of letters and the arts.

More significantly, the two love stories form a hidden correspondence in time. You San-jie's affection for Liu Xiang-lian lasts five years; Bao-yu, in his "*Elegy to the Hibiscus Spirit,*" likewise recalls that he and Qing-wen "lived together for only five years and eight months." Dong Xiaowan, too, entered Mao's household in the year yi-you (1645) and passed away in the first month of xin-mao (1651), a little over five years. The three timelines intertwine to form a literary cycle of predestined recurrence.

The author fashions You Sanjie as a projection of Lin Dai-yu, and perhaps through her associated figure Liu Xiang-lian, Mao Pijiang mirrors the hidden dimensions of his own emotion. By giving Liu Xiang-lian a "cold heart," he anatomizes his own cruelty toward Dong Xiaowan; through Liu's later act of tonsure, he symbolizes his repentance.
Through this character correspondence, Liu Xiang-lian becomes not only a projection of Jia Bao-yu but also a literary surrogate for Mao Pijiang's self-reflection.

2. Dai-yu's "Five Elegies on the Beauties" and Dong Xiaowan

In Chapter 64, Dai-yu composes five quatrains on Xi Shi, Wang Zhaojun, Yu Ji, Lü Zhu, and Hongfu. Each represents a facet of the talented yet doomed woman, exactly the image projected onto Dong Xiaowan in *Reminiscences*.

- **Hongfu:** famed for recognizing Li Jing's talent and following him into exile. Dong Xiaowan said in *Reminiscences*, "From morning to night I have observed your conduct, so full of magnanimity and chivalric spirit... I know your heart better than any other, and revere you more than I love you." This remark perfectly embodies Hongfu's loyalty and insight.

- **Wang Zhaojun:** Wang Zhaojun married into the Xiongnu realm, exchanging her beauty and talent for peace at the border, and thus became the archetype of the "sacrificial woman."
  At the end of *Reminiscences*, the dream shared by Mao Pijiang and Dong Xiaowan hints that she once faced the danger of being taken by force. Dong herself had said:
  "Should calamity befall my husband, how could I leave this frail body amid the ravages of war, where could I seek refuge?"
  She had already prepared herself to sacrifice her own safety for the peace of the Mao household.

  Wu Weiye's poem, *"Eight Quatrains on Lady Dong Xiaowan's Portrait"*[11] records her similar sentiment:
  "If only your family might be spared, never again need you turn to me; let my body perish, I care not for the hardship."

  The lines likewise reveal her determination to bear the calamities of the age with her own frail being, protecting others at the cost of herself.

  Even if the historical truth remains uncertain, the allegorical structure is already clear: a woman's fragile body becomes the vessel through which familial, ethnic, and cultural survival, and even peace itself, are preserved. Its moral and symbolic resonance directly parallels the legend of "Zhaojun's journey beyond the frontier."

  Subsequent evidence will further support this interpretation.

- **Xi Shi:** In the *Five Elegies on the Beauties*, Lin Dai-yu does not praise Xi Shi for her unrivaled beauty, but writes instead:

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[11] Wu Weiye, *Collected Works from Meicun* (*Meicun ji*, Siku Quanshu edition), juan 18.

"Do not mock the village girl who mimics a frown; with white hair, she still washes silk by the stream."

The poem suggests that while the village girl continues her humble life by the stream, the true Xi Shi has already been taken into the palace and never returns. Through this, Dai-yu, or the author behind her, expresses a sense of loss and lament that the true beauty has disappeared into the depths of the court and become a shadow that can no longer find her way home.

In this sense, Dong Xiaowan may likewise resemble Xi Shi, taken into the palace and burdened with an unspoken mission. In *Reminiscences,* Mao Pijiang described her as "no mortal woman in the world," and in *Dream of the Red Chamber*, when Bao-yu mourns Qing-wen, he remarks, "I had long foreseen that one such as her was destined to accomplish a great work."
Both statements suggest that Dong Xiaowan was not a mere boudoir woman but one who bore the Xi Shi-like burden of sacrifice and absence.

- **Lü Zhu:** The story of Lüzhu, who threw herself from a tower in the Western Jin dynasty to preserve her chastity, came to be regarded as the archetype of "dying for virtue."

  In the early Qing period, the famous courtesans of the Qinhuai River were repeatedly subjected to plunder and peril, and Dong Xiaowan likewise found herself in grave danger. *Reminiscences* records her words: "I shall exhaust all my strength in devotion to my husband." Her resolute vow is a faithful reenactment of the spirit of Lüzhu.

- **Yu Ji:** The consort of the defeated King of Chu, Yu Ji took her own life after his downfall, leaving behind the tragic tale of *Farewell My Concubine*.
  She likewise died to preserve her honor, embodying the ultimate loyalty of following her beloved in death.

  In *Dream of the Red Chamber*, the fates of several female projections, such as You San-jie's suicide and Jin Chuan'er's leap into the well, echo this "Yu Ji motif" on different levels.

Taken together, the *Five Songs* are not merely a showcase of Dai-yu's talent but an allegory of sacrifice.

Dong Xiaowan's life mirrors each archetype:
her discernment, Hongfu;

her possible palace captivity, Xi Shi and Wang Zhaojun;
her fidelity unto death, Lü Zhu and Yu Ji.

This is clearly a deliberate structural design, a multi-layered method of projection.
The historical figure Dong Xiaowan is not only projected onto fictional characters such as Lin Dai-yu and Xue Bao-chai, but also alluded to through the five historical beauties themselves.
Within the novel, Dai-yu in turn gathers these motifs anew through her poetry.
Thus, *Five Elegies on the Beauties* becomes, in essence, a "song of projections" for Dong Xiaowan, and the author's narrative intention further converges on the theme of mourning.

D. The Network of Projections and the Nodes of Mourning: Lin Siniang and Wu Koukou

Within the complex network of projections in *Dream of the Red Chamber*, the female figures are not merely symbolic personae of singular identity, but serve as "nodes of mourning," bearing the author's layered inscriptions of death, fidelity, and projection.
As discussed earlier, characters such as Lin Dai-yu's "Five Beauties," Qing-wen, You San-jie, Jin Chuan'er, and Qin Ke-qing each embody different aspects of Dong Xiaowan's life history, and most are intimately linked to the motif of self-sacrifice or lamentation.

Within this "mourning chain," two further women deserve attention: Lin Siniang and Wu Koukou.

Lin Siniang functions as an internal node of mourning within the novel. Through her identities as female warrior, concubine, and martyr to chastity, she serves as the historical annotation of the "union of Chai and Dai."

Wu Koukou, by contrast, is a historical node of mourning. Symbolically, she becomes the real-life projection of Qing-wen, and through substitution and fictionalization, emerges as Dong Xiaowan's "returning double," allowing the work of mourning to continue beyond death.

Although one belongs to the realm of fiction and the other to historical record, the two complement each other within the same mourning mechanism, revealing a shared logic in the operation of remembrance and substitution.

1. Lin Siniang and the Dual Resonance of the *Guǐhuà Ci*

a. Lin Siniang – Dai-yu – Xie Daoyun

In Chapter 78 of *Dream of the Red Chamber*, Bao-yu, at his father's command, composes the *Ballad of Heroic Women* (*Guǐhuà Ci*) in memory of the late-Ming heroine Lin Siniang.

In historical records, Lin Siniang is depicted as a Qinhuai performer who later became the consort of Prince Heng and finally died defending him in battle—a figure combining the roles of courtesan, consort, and martyr.

The connection between Lin Siniang and Lin Dai-yu lies not merely in their shared surname. Dai-yu's prophetic poem reads, "Pity her for her talent in chanting snow," a phrase that alludes to Xie Daoyun, famed for her "talent in chanting snow." Yet Xie was more than a poet: according to historical accounts, she once took up arms and led her household women to repel bandits. She thus embodied both literary grace and martial valor.

Within this framework, Lin Siniang and Xie Daoyun become overlapping figures: one historical, the other emblematic. Lin Siniang's surname "Lin," together with her recorded origin in Qingzhou, strengthens the symbolic correspondence between Lin Siniang and Lin Dai-yu, as *qing* (blue-green) and *dai* (blackish-blue) traditionally belong to the same chromatic family used to describe women's brows.

Thus, the supposed allusion to Xie Daoyun in Dai-yu's prophetic poem can be read as a veiled echo of Lin Siniang herself, whose image remains hidden beneath the poetic code.

Through the mirroring of Lin Siniang and Xie Daoyun, the author endows Dai-yu with the moral quality of righteousness, expanding her image beyond that of the frail poetic maiden. In this way, the projection technique enables readers to glimpse the moral and historical prototype that underlies Dai-yu's ethereal persona.

b. The *Guǐhuà Ci* and the Annotation to the "Union of Chai and Dai"

In Chapter 78, the composition of the *Ballad of Heroic Women* (*Guǐhuà Ci*) stands precisely between two major narrative moments: Bao-yu's writing of the *Elegy to the Hibiscus Spirit* for Qing-wen, and Xue Bao-chai's departure from the Grand View Garden. The juxtaposition is deliberate. The former foreshadows Dai-yu's destiny; the latter marks the temporary separation of "Chai and Dai." The sudden introduction of Lin Siniang concretizes the motif of "Chai and Dai as one": within this structure, Qing-wen serves as the projection of Dong Xiaowan before entering the palace, Bao-chai represents Dong Xiaowan on the verge of entering it, while Lin Siniang provides the historical annotation explaining why she had to enter the palace at all.

Thus, Lin Siniang is not a mere narrative digression but a crucial node in the network of projections. Her image reveals another dimension of Dong Xiaowan's fate: the transition from *talented woman* to *imperial consort* and further intensifies the elegiac motif of the *faithful woman who dies in loyalty*.

In *Eulogy and Preface for My Late Concubine Dong Xiaowan*, Mao Pijiang describes his deceased concubine as "her spirit remains *guǐhuà* (graceful)." The rare term *guǐhuà* directly echoes the title of Bao-yu's poem, intertwining Dong Xiaowan and Lin Siniang within the same chain of symbolic association.

Through this layered network of projections, the text leaves a lingering question: Does Dong Xiaowan's destiny conclude with the dual image of the *talented* and the *faithful* woman, or does it continue into a more veiled transformation in subsequent historical memory?

2. Wu Koukou and the Transfer of Mourning

Wu Koukou was Mao Pijiang's personal maid. All extant information about her derives from *Biography of Lady Wu Koukou*[12] by Chen Weisong, the leading lyricist (*Cí* poet) of the late Ming and early Qing, hereafter referred to as *Biography*, and from his later *Anthology of Women*. In 1658, Chen sought refuge with the Mao family and resided for eight years in their Shihuì Garden, maintaining an exceptionally close relationship with Mao Pijiang.

The *Biography* records:

"Her surname was Wu, styled Koukou, named Meilan, courtesy name Xiangyi, a native of Zhenzhou. She died at the age of nineteen. Her understanding of moral principle and her temperament and intellect were no different from Lady Dong's. I am convinced she must be her reincarnation." Such statements make clear that Wu Koukou was regarded as the *reincarnation* of Dong Xiaowan.

a. The Reflection of Qing-wen

Wu Koukou, described as intelligent and devout from childhood, entered the Mao household at the age of ten. The Biography records:

"At ten, she had already vowed chastity and practiced vegetarianism, and followed Madam Mao in chanting the Buddha's name and reciting the Diamond Sutra."

Her background closely parallels that of Qing-wen in *Dream of the Red Chamber,* who likewise entered Grandmother Jia's service at the age of ten (Chapter 77).

Wu Koukou practiced vegetarianism. Although *Dream of the Red Chamber* never explicitly states that Qing-wen was a vegetarian, Chapter 61 offers a telling hint: Lianhua remarks that

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[12] Chen Weisong (Qing dynasty), *Collected Essays from the Lake and Sea Tower* (*Huhai lou wenji*), juan 5, *Biography of Lady Wu Koukou*.

Qing-wen wishes to eat *haozi gan* (mugwort stems), and Chunyan reminds her, "Better fry her some wheat gluten with little oil." The cook immediately "washed her hands and prepared it herself."

This detail, the act of washing hands combined with the choice of light, meatless ingredients, suggests that Qing-wen likewise inclined toward a vegetarian diet.

Moreover, both Wu Koukou and Qing-wen die soon after the Mid-Autumn Festival, their lives following a similar arc, from favor and affection to frailty and early death. After Wu Koukou's passing, "the master wept in grief" and entrusted Chen Weisong to compose her biography; likewise, after Qing-wen's death, Bao-yu composed the *Elegy to the Hibiscus Spirit*.

For this reason, Qing-wen may be read as the literary transfiguration of Wu Koukou.

b. The Begonia, the Prophecy, and the Lü Zhu Motif

The *Biography* records that Wu Koukou planted a white begonia and sighed, "Those before planted flowers, those after will admire them; for whom, then, do I plant them today?"
Her tone closely parallels Lin Dai-yu's mourning of fallen blossoms in Chapter 27 of *Dream of the Red Chamber*.

In Chapter 77 of the novel, when Bao-yu cries over Qing-wen, he takes the withering of the begonia as an "omen," further reinforcing the symbolic connection between flowers and premature death. Bao-yu says, "A fine begonia under the steps, half of it withered for no reason, I knew some misfortune was coming, and indeed it was fulfilled in her."

Even more striking is the ambiguous account of Wu Koukou's death in the *Biography*. On the one hand, it directly states that she "died of illness at nineteen." On the other hand, Mao Pijiang is quoted as citing *The Book of Jin:* "Who could have foreseen that after Bao's biography there would follow one of Ji Lun. Lü Zhu's fall from the tower has thus become today's omen."

Shi Chong, whose courtesy name was Ji Lun, was the wealthy lord whose beloved concubine Lü Zhu threw herself from a tower rather than be taken by force. Her death became a lasting emblem of fidelity and martyrdom. Here, the allusion to Lü Zhu is explicitly cast as a prophetic cipher for Wu Koukou's fate.

This tension between factual narration and symbolic reference, together with the deliberate invocation of the Lü Zhu legend, exposes the hidden intertext between *Reminiscences*, *Dream of the Red Chamber*, and earlier moral archetypes. "Lü Zhu" thus emerges as the shared cipher linking Qing-wen, Dai-yu, Dong Xiaowan, and Wu Koukou.

c. The Puzzle of Native Place and Name

Another puzzling detail lies in Wu Koukou's recorded birthplace: Zhenzhou.

Zhenzhou was abolished in the second year of the Hongwu reign (1369) and renamed Yizheng. That Chen Weisong, writing three centuries later, still uses the obsolete toponym is clearly intentional.

Her name, too, is full of hidden meaning.

In *Dream of the Red Chamber*, Bao-yu says that Qing-wen "has no recorded surname: her native place and lineage have long been lost to memory."

Wu Koukou's surname:

- Surname "Wu" (吴) is a homophone of *wu* (无, "none");
- Given name "Meilan" (梅兰, "plum-orchid") echoes *mei-lai* (没来, "never came");
- Courtesy name "Xiangyi" (湘逸, "receding Xiang") resonates with the "Lady of Xiao and Xiang" and with the notion of disappearance.

Taken together, these linguistic clues suggest that her very name was constructed as a series of cryptic signs.

This art of naming recalls the novel's famous line: "When false is taken for true, the true becomes false; where nothing exists, something comes to be." The play of *zhen* (真, truth) and *jia* (假, illusion), *you* (有, being) and *wu* (无, non-being), suggests that Wu Koukou may not have been an entirely historical person, but rather a symbolic reconstruction within a broader network of allegorical identities.

d. The Anomalous Inclusion in *Anthology of Women*

Anthology of Women by Chen Weisong mainly features learned and renowned women, its first entry being Princess Changping, each possessing literary fame or preserved writings. Wu Koukou, by contrast, left neither poems nor public reputation, yet was still included.

Such an "anomalous inclusion" is itself a deliberate signal. If not for her literary output, her place in the anthology must derive from her representational and symbolic importance. In other words,

Wu Koukou's significance lies not in authorship but in what she embodies, as a surrogate, a cipher, and a carrier of remembrance within the structure of mourning.

e. The Logic of Transferred Mourning

Wu Koukou died in the autumn of 1660. On one hand, she is depicted in the biography as a maid in the Mao household; on the other, her birthplace and name both carry hints of *fictionalization*. It may be inferred that such writing served a function of *transferred mourning*: after the death of Dong Xiaowan, Mao Pijiang may have used the name Wu Koukou to complete another layer of mourning.

Wu Koukou can therefore be regarded as the real-life projection of the mourning mechanism found in *Dream of the Red Chamber*. If she represents the *shadow of mourning*, then the central figure behind that shadow lies within the imperial palace, the Consort Dong'e: who also died in the autumn of 1660. This "autumnal death" thus constitutes a temporal cipher, which will be discussed in greater depth later.

Hence, Lin Siniang and Wu Koukou, though one is a celebrated heroine recorded in history and the other a young maid who died prematurely, both perform parallel functions as *nodes of mourning* within the textual network. Lin Siniang symbolizes the fate of the *talented woman–consort–martyr*, reflecting Dong Xiaowan's possible destiny; Wu Koukou, through substitution and cryptic signification, allows the mourning to continue.

Together they complete a dual cycle of mourning, from history into fiction, and from fiction back into history. Their existence gradually shapes the hidden clue linking *Dong Xiaowan and Consort Dong'e*, allowing individual life to be extended and reborn through the chain of projections.

Summary of Part II

It thus becomes evident that *Reminiscences of the Shadow Plum Hermitage* and *Biography of the Lady Wu Koukou* are not merely works of mourning but can be read as *cipher texts* of *Dream of the Red Chamber*.
They echo one another both textually and emotionally, providing the novel with decipherable clues and connecting its fictional design to historical reality and cultural context. In doing so, they weave together personal memory and literary imagination, forming a vital intertextual framework for understanding the novel's narrative logic.

Part III: The Courtly Cipher of *Dream of the Red Chamber*

Having examined the intertextual function of *Reminiscences of the Shadow Plum Hermitage* as a "cipher text," this section turns to the novel's palatial allegory. On the surface, *Dream of the Red Chamber* portrays boudoir life and familial joys and sorrows; but a closer reading reveals allusions to court events embedded deep within the narrative.

To clarify this allegorical mechanism, I propose four interpretive dimensions: the temporal cipher, the character cipher, the spatial cipher, and the cultural cipher. Through the juxtaposition of these dimensions, the novel not only enlarges the domestic narrative into a broader historical vista, but also links individual destinies to dynastic rise and fall, thereby exposing the courtly cipher concealed beneath the story.

A. The Paradox of Bao-chai's Birthday and the Temporal Cipher of Autumnal Death

1. The First-Month Paradox: The Convergence of Birthday and Day of Mourning

In the novel, Xue Bao-chai's birthday falls in the first lunar month, which is also the setting of Chapter 22, "Riddles by Lantern Light; Jia Zheng's Lament of Ominous Prophecy." What should have been a festive scene is overshadowed by the riddles' inauspicious hints and Jia Zheng's ominous pronouncements. Bao-chai's birthday is deliberately recast in the narrative as a day of mourning.

In the historical record, Mao Pijiang in his *Eulogy and Preface for My Late Concubine Dong Xiaowan* declares that Dong Xiaowan died in the first lunar month of Shunzhi 8 (1651). Yet, as argued earlier, the textual signs make this "first-month death" read more like a departure than an actual death.

Within the fiction, Bao-chai, as a projection, inherits this symbolism of departure: her "birthday" signifies another kind of living separation. This paradox of "birthday–day of mourning" reflects the historical memory of Dong Xiaowan's "first-month death," literary transformed into Bao-chai's birthday elegy, implying that Bao-chai represents Dong Xiaowan after entering the palace.

Accordingly, in Chapter 78, where Bao-chai leaves the Grand View Garden, Qing-wen, the shadow of Dai-yu, moves toward death along the same narrative line: one "birth," one "death," jointly complete the mirrored tableau of first-month parting.

If the “first-month death” is but a departure, then the autumnal death is the true end. In the novel, Qing-wen, Qin Ke-qing, Jin Chuan'er, and other projections all die in autumn; and in reality, Wu Koukou, Dong Xiaowan’s “returning soul,” also dies in autumn. This repeated motif of “autumnal death” shows the author’s intention to set autumn as the real moment of mourning. Thus, “autumnal death” is not merely a plot rhythm— it is the terminal code embedded in the novel’s temporal structure.

2. The Autumnal Cipher: From “Eighth Month, Nineteenth Day” to the “Seven-Seven” Funerary Rhythm

The novel’s opening gives a precise date: the nineteenth day of the eighth month. In Chapter 1, on the Mid-Autumn night, Zhen Shi-yin reminds Jia Yu-cun that “the nineteenth is an auspicious day.” Such precision is rare in the book and is thus clearly deliberate.

Historical correspondence: on Shunzhi 17, Eighth Month, Nineteenth Day (1660), Consort Dong E passed away. The novel thereby installs the historical “autumnal death” date as the *first explicitly marked date of the entire book*, launching a hidden temporal cipher.

This cipher unfolds through the traditional “seven-sevens” funeral rhythm:

- Taking Eighth Month, Nineteenth as zero point;
- The first seven falls on Eighth Month, Twenty-Fifth;
- The second seven on Ninth Month, Second.

This calendar–funerary encoding projects itself onto key character events, forming the structural framework of the novel’s elegiac narrative.

a. Qing-wen and Wu Koukou: Twin Projections after Mid-Autumn

Chapter 77, set just after the Mid-Autumn Festival, records Lady Wang’s inspection of the Grand View Garden: Qing-wen is expelled, her illness worsens, Bao-yu secretly visits her, and learns of her death the next day, explicitly dated to the days following Mid-Autumn.

In parallel, The Biography of Lady Wu Koukou records: “Two days after Mid-Autumn this year, she reached the tender age of nineteen.” In the Wu regional speech, “two days after” can mean “some days thereafter,” not necessarily an exact forty-eight hours.

The shared marker of “after Mid-Autumn” adds yet another crucial parallel between Qing-wen and Wu Koukou, linking fiction and history.

b. Qin Ke-qing: An "Imperial-Consort" Funeral in the Eighth Month

Although the month is not stated outright, details allow us to infer the timing. Chapter 23 has Wang Xi-feng summoned to the Ning household to manage the rites:
"This day was the fifth of the five sevens, and Zhao'er, returning from Suzhou, arrived. Wang Xi-feng asked, 'Why have you come back?' Zhao'er said, 'Second Master sent me. Master Lin died at the third day of the ninth month, at the hour of *si*. Second Master has taken Miss Lin to escort the bier to Suzhou; they will likely return by year's end.'"

By funerary count, the fifth of the five sevens is Day 33. Zhao'er hurried from Suzhou to the capital; even by the fastest hired boat along the Grand Canal between Suzhou and Beijing during the Ming–Qing period, the journey would have taken more than ten days. Based on this timeline, if Zhao'er arrived at the Ning household when the mourning had reached the fifth seventh, Qin Ke-qing's death must have occurred in mid-to-late August, which corresponds precisely to the hidden motif of "autumnal death."

Her over-ranked funeral, approaching that of an empress, elevates a boudoir woman's death to the level of state mourning, echoing historical memory of Consort Dong E and making Qin Ke-qing a key carrier of the novel's palatial allegory.

c. Ming-yu: The "First Seven" on Eighth Month, Twenty-Fifth

In Chapter 42, when Granny Liu tells the tale of Ming-yu, Bao-yu sends Ming-yan to find her shrine and make offerings. Meanwhile, Qiao-jie is ill; Ping'er fetches *The Jade Casket* for Cai-ming to divine:
"Cai-ming turned the pages and read: 'On the twenty-fifth day of the eighth month, the patient will meet the Flower Spirit in the southeast; offer forty sheets of five-colored paper money, forty paces to the southeast, most auspicious.'"

The twenty-fifth day of the eighth month precisely corresponds to the *first seventh day* after the nineteenth. In other words, the novel establishes a hidden correspondence between calendrical time and the rhythm of funerary rites: the date of Consort Dong E's passing in history reappears seven days later as a ritual node within the novel's narrative world.

Even more intriguing is the way the notion of the "Flower Spirit" transforms this funerary cipher into a symbolic prophecy. The first seventh-day rite in the mourning cycle is imagined in the narrative as an encounter with the Flower Spirit. Not until Chapter 78, when Bao-yu hears a maid say, "Sister Qing-wen has become the Flower Spirit," does the earlier divinatory line receive retrospective confirmation: the "Flower Spirit" is in fact Dai-yu's projection, Qing-wen. Thus, a

symbolic chain is completed, from the “first seventh day” to the “Flower Spirit,” and from the “Flower Spirit” to Qing-wen. So that the temporal cipher of “the nineteenth of the eighth month” is once again echoed in the fates of the characters.

d. Jin Chuan’er: The “Second Seventh” on the Second Day of the Ninth Month

Although Jin Chuan’er had died by suicide several months earlier, Bao-yu deliberately chose to commemorate her in private on Wang Xi-feng’s birthday, the second day of the ninth month.

Chapter 43 begins: “In the twinkling of an eye, it was already the second day of the ninth month...” Xi-ren sighed: “...Since early morning we have been asked to wear plain clothing again. Perhaps a favored concubine of Prince Bei-Jing has passed away, who can tell?”

In reality, however, Bao-yu and the page Ming-yan secretly slip away to the Water Immortal Nunnery to offer sacrifices to Jin Chuan’er. Ming-yan murmurs, “Rare in heaven and unique on earth.” This is a remark that virtually places Jin Chuan’er alongside the paired figures of Bao-chai and Dai-yu, implying that she, too, belongs to Dai-yu’s projectional chain.

The date, the second day of the ninth month, corresponds precisely to the second seventh day after the nineteenth of the eighth month, that is, the second stage in the traditional forty-nine-day funerary sequence. Bao-yu’s decision to skip Xi-feng’s birthday celebration and instead secretly honor Jin Chuan’er creates a stark juxtaposition of “birthday” and “mourning day,” further reinforcing the narrative undercurrent of autumnal death.

What is even more noteworthy is that, as a participant in the symbolic system of Dai-yu and Bao-chai’s projections, Jin Chuan’er is drawn into the courtly allegory through the pretext of being “a concubine of Prince Bei-Jing.” Thus, this “second seventh-day” commemoration is not merely the posthumous affair of a minor maid but another moment of resonance between the Chai–Dai projections and the novel’s concealed palatial motif.

Summary
From the explicit “Eighth Month, Nineteenth” at the outset, the novel repeats the motif of autumnal death across characters:

- Qing-wen dies shortly after Mid-Autumn;
- Ming-yu’s offering is set on Eighth Month, Twenty-Fifth (*first seven*);
- Jin Chuan'er’s memorial is on Ninth Month, Second (*second seven*);
- Qin Ke-qing’s death can be inferred as falling in mid-to-late Eighth Month.

These episodes weave calendar nodes with mourning intervals, turning the "seven-sevens" into the story's temporal scaffold, a persistent cipher of autumnal death that echoes the historical date of Consort Dong E's demise (Shunzhi 17, Eighth Month, Nineteenth).

If Bao-chai's first-month birthday intimates Dong Xiaowan's departure before entering the palace, then Eighth Month, Nineteenth reveals her true death after entry. This double coding overlays narrative rhythm with historical event, letting Dong Xiaowan and Consort Dong E meet at opposite ends of the timeline. And behind this convergence lies the reason for the constructed figure of Wu Koukou: under her name, the author performs one more act of mourning.

B. The Outsiders and the Courtly Allegory

1. Granny Liu and the Allegory of the Invaders

a. Narrative portrayal and character function

In *Dream of the Red Chamber*, Granny Liu and her family appear as rustic figures from the countryside: crude in speech and awkward in manner during the first visit to the Rong mansion. On the second visit to the Grand View Garden, her drunken antics and clumsy behavior provide comic relief. Yet the author's intention extends far beyond simple humor. Through subtle rhetorical choices, the narrative hints at a deeper symbolic layer.

In Chapter 41, when Miao-yu personally serves the matriarch with a rare *Cheng-ware five-colored lidded cup*, she later orders it removed and discarded after Granny Liu drinks from it, saying she would "rather have it smashed than reuse it." Her disgust, immediately echoed by Dai-yu's mockery, reinforces the social and symbolic degradation of Liu's identity.

In Chapter 42, Dai-yu even calls her a "mother locust" and improvises the satirical title *Picture of the Great Locust Banquet*. Bao-chai explains that Dai-yu has followed the *Spring and Autumn* principle of subtle wording and implicit praise and blame. Hence, the term "mother locust" is not mere ridicule; it carries allegorical significance.

b. The meaning of "mother locust" in the Ming–Qing transition

This epithet resonates deeply with the political imagination of the Ming–Qing transition. In the late Ming, successive locust plagues caused famine and helped ignite peasant uprisings led by Li Zicheng and Zhang Xianzhong. The Manchu invasion took advantage of this chaos, and Wu Sangui's betrayal sealed the Ming dynasty's fate.

The locust swarms that darkened the sun and obscured the moon were not merely natural calamities but emblems of cosmic eclipse, an image in which the veiling of the sun and moon (日 and 月, together forming 明 "Ming," the dynasty's name) allegorically foretells the fall of the Ming.

Even the "Clear Wing and Bright Moon Case" of early Qing censorship shows that *qing-feng* ("clear wind") could be interpreted as an allusion to the Qing regime, since the complex graph *feng* (風, "wind") contains the radical *chong* (虫, "insect"). Within this linguistic and cultural context, "insect" and "locust" became intertwined symbols. Thus, Dai-yu's use of "mother locust" transforms the rustic woman into a symbolic invader, an embodiment of the northern conquerors entering the Central Plains.

c. The phonetic cipher in the Liu family's names

Chapter 6 introduces the family as follows:
"There once lived a man named Wang Cheng, who had a son nicknamed Dog'er. Dog'er's wife was Liu, and they had two children: a son Ban'er and a daughter Qing'er."
Beneath these seemingly ordinary names lies a network of phonetic and historical ciphers alluding to the Qing conquest of the Central Plains.

- **Wang Cheng → Cheng Wang (Becoming King)**
  The novel notes that Wang Cheng, father of Dog'er, had already passed away. When reversed, the name reads "becoming king," echoing the founding of the Qing dynasty, when Nurhaci unified the Jurchen tribes and "became king." Historical records also note that Nurhaci's maternal grandfather bore the Han name *Wang Gao*, further reinforcing the significance of the surname *Wang*.

- **Dog'er → Dorgon / Duo-hunchong**
  LiuDog'er, Granny Liu's son-in-law, directly evokes "dog," corresponding to Dorgon (*Duo'er Gun*, 多尔衮), Nurhaci's fourteenth son, whose Manchu name literally means "dog badger." Another minor figure in the novel, Duo-hunchong (多浑虫, "many insects"), contains the same syllable *duo* ("many") and the component *chong* ("insect"), echoing Dorgon both phonetically and symbolically.
  In Chapter 77, Qing-wen, after being expelled from the Garden, stays at Duo-hunchong's house, further linking this name to the novel's courtly cipher, a connection later confirmed in the Consort Dong'E thread.

- **Ban'er → Fan-mu = Anti-Ming**
  The name *Ban* (板) can be decomposed into *fan* (反, rebellion) and *mu* (木, wood). Because Ming imperial names often contained the *wood* radical (as in Zhu Youxiao and Zhu Youjian), *fan-mu* connotes "rebelling against Ming." Ban'er, as the next generation, allegorizes the "children of the anti-Ming era" born under Dorgon's regency during the early Shunzhi reign.

- **Qing'er → Qing (the Qing dynasty)**
  The simplest cipher: "Qing-er" sounds identical to "Qing," explicitly naming the new dynasty.

- **Liu → Jin and Violence**
  The traditional form of *Liu* (劉) combines the radical *jin* (金) with *mao* (卯) and *dao* (刀, blade), evoking the imagery of arms and conquest. Graphically, the character encodes "Jin–Qing–blade," symbolizing warfare and subjugation. The component *jin* also recalls the Jurchen Jin dynasty, the historical predecessor of the Qing, reinforcing the theme of northern lineage and conquest.

- **The Nursery Rhyme → Devouring the Zhu clan**
  In Chapter 40, Granny Liu jokes:"Old Liu, Old Liu, eats like a cow; devours a whole sow and doesn't even look up." The pun *zhu* ("sow") is a homophone of *Zhu*, the Ming imperial surname. "Eating Zhu" thus becomes a verbal cipher for devouring the Ming house.

Through this series of linguistic puns and phonetic ciphers, Granny Liu's family, though portrayed as rustic commoners on the surface, emerges at the allegorical level as a symbolic microcosm of the Manchu invaders.

d. Qiao-jie's Fate and the Dual Nature of Granny Liu

Qiao-jie's prophetic verse reads, "By aiding the Lius, the Qiao meets her benefactor," indicating that her destiny is closely tied to the Liu family. In Chapter 41, she briefly interacts with Granny Liu's grandson, Ban'er:

"Qiao-jie was playing with a pomelo when she saw Ban'er holding a Buddha's hand; she wanted that instead... The maids swapped the toys, her pomelo for his Buddha's hand."

On the surface, it is mere child's play, yet allegorically, the exchange carries symbolic depth. The Buddha's hand represents blessing and longevity, while the pomelo (*youzi*) puns on "having a

son." Their exchange enacts a fateful marital omen, suggesting that Qiao-jie's future husband will come from Liu's line.

Her accompanying song deepens this allegory through graphic and calendrical analysis. The phrase "Heaven above the firmament" contains radicals connected with "Dong" (董) and "Wan" (宛): the upper components, "grass" and "roof," mirror those of *Dong* and *Wan*, while the lower elements of *Wan*—"*xi*" (夕) and "*qi*" (七)—correspond to the Qixi Festival, Qiao-jie's birthday. Qixi, the lovers' reunion night, is also the day when Emperor Xuanzong and Yang Guifei swore eternal love in *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow*. Thus, Qiao-jie's fate mirrors Yang Guifei's tragic destiny in the court.

The picture accompanying her prophecy, "A village woman spinning in a deserted hamlet," recalls the weaving girl (Er Ya-tou) whom Bao-yu encounters during Qin Ke-qing's funeral procession. These interwoven motifs of spinning, palace, and mourning link Qiao-jie to Qin Ke-qing through Er Ya-tou as narrative conduit, all within the same chain of courtly projections.

Hence, although Qiao-jie scarcely speaks in the first eighty chapters, she is nonetheless one of the Twelve Beauties of Jinling. Her inclusion completes the fragmented avatar of Dong Xiaowan: her fate intimates "marriage into the palace," shadowing Dong's transformation into Consort Dong E. Granny Liu, therefore, is not merely comic relief but the northern force propelling this destiny, her family forming the hidden mechanism that initiates Qiao-jie's tragic path.

e. Summary

Granny Liu and her family operate on two intertwined levels:

Surface function: rustic comedy, bringing laughter through vulgar speech and farcical scenes.
Symbolic function: allegory of the northern conquerors, their names encoding the puns of "Qing" and "anti-Ming," forming a microcosm of the Manchu takeover.

Qiao-jie's prophecy and song extend this allegory further: she joins Qin Ke-qing and Yuan-chun within the chain of palatial projections, her destiny foreshadowing "entry into the court," mirroring Dong Xiaowan's transformation into Consort Dong E.

Thus, the Liu family is far more than a comic interlude; they are a narrative instrument of dynastic allegory. And Qiao-jie's inclusion among the Twelve Beauties of Jinling is an indispensable piece of this allegorical mosaic.

2. Prince Bei-Jing and the Courtly Cipher: From the *Jiling* Beads to the Fisherman Couple

Prince Bei-Jing, though appearing only briefly in *Dream of the Red Chamber*, plays a crucial symbolic role. His interactions with Bao-yu consistently center on the exchange and circulation of objects, which serve as veiled emblems of courtly relations.

a. The "Jiling Beads" and the Chain of Brotherhood

When they first meet in Chapter 15, Prince Bei-Jing asks to examine Bao-yu's "Magic Jade of Spiritual Understanding," then immediately presents him with the "Jiling Fragrant Beads," a token bestowed upon him by the Emperor. The *Book of Songs*, "Xiaoya: Xiaowan," includes the line "The wagtails there fly and sing," where the wagtail (*jiling*) has long symbolized brotherly affection. The phrase "Xiaowan" also echoes "Dong Xiaowan."
In the novel, Bao-yu later passes the bead to Dai-yu, who refuses it with the sharp remark: "Something that filthy men have handled, I don't want it."
The trajectory of this object, from the Emperor to the Prince, from the Prince to Bao-yu, and from Bao-yu to Dai-yu followed by her refusal, forms a clear narrative chain of imperial bestowal, transfer, and rejection.

b. The "Fisherman Couple" and the Cipher of Marriage

In Chapter 45, Bao-yu appears dressed as a fisherman, wearing a bamboo raincoat and clogs, explaining that all were gifts from Prince Bei-Jing, who at home also wears such attire on rainy days. Dai-yu again refuses: "I don't want anything from him."

The image of the fisherman and fisherwoman traditionally signifies a paired husband-and-wife union. Dai-yu's repeated refusal, in echo with the instance above, signals estrangement from and rejection of court ties.

c. The Belt and the Chain of Mourning

In Chapter 28, a belt bestowed by Prince Bei-Jing passes from the actor Jiang Yuhan to Bao-yu, then is tied around Xi-ren's waist, thereby drawing Xi-ren, a reflection of Bao-chai, into the same web of courtly symbolism.

After Jin Chuan'er's suicide by drowning, Bao-yu uses the pretext that "Prince Bei-Jing has lost a beloved concubine," which further binds Jin Chuan'er into the same allegorical thread.

Through these dual pathways of gift and mourning, both Xi-ren and Jin Chuan'er become integral figures within the Dai–Chai projection system, each resonating with the cipher embodied by the prince.

d. Historical Reflection: Shuo-sai and Shui-rong

From a historical perspective, Prince Bei-Jing corresponds to Shuo-sai, who bore the princely title Prince Chengze. The character "*shuo*" (硕) means "great," and "*ze*" (泽) denotes marsh or beneficent waters; together, they suggest the image of "great waters." Likewise, in the novel, the Prince's name Shui-rong conveys the grandeur and movement of water. The parallel between "great waters" and "flowing waters" forms a symbolic echo between history and fiction. More importantly, Prince Bei-Jing's family genealogy shows intriguing connections with Consort Dong E, a thread that will be examined here in later discussion.

Hence, Prince Bei-Jing is not a mere supporting figure. He stands as a crucial node within the courtly cipher of *Dream of the Red Chamber*. On one level, he symbolizes the extension of Qing imperial authority. On another, through the recurring pattern of giving and refusal, he encodes the author's veiled writing on court relations. In this allegorical structure, the prince's presence also indirectly reflects the tragic destiny of Consort Dong E, that is, Dong Xiaowan.

3. The Jiangxue Pavilion and the Spatial Cipher of *Dream of the Red Chamber*

Beyond its characters and allegories, *Dream of the Red Chamber* also conceals courtly ciphers through its spatial design. The most typical example is Xue Bao-chai's residence, the Hengwu Pavilion, whose layout and color imagery closely correspond to the Jiangxue Pavilion (the Crimson Snow) located at the southeastern corner of the Imperial Garden in the Forbidden City.

a. Architectural Distinctiveness of the Palace Structure

According to records from the Palace Museum, the Jiangxue Pavilion was first built during the Yongle reign of the Ming dynasty and rebuilt in the Shunzhi period. It "spans five bays, with a yellow-glazed tile roof in the hard-mountain style," yet "uses no gilt decoration or vermilion columns," instead adopting "paintings in bamboo patterns and natural nanmu wood for doors and windows." The entire building is elegant and simple, sharply contrasting with the gilded splendor of other palatial halls, and thus appears distinct in tone and style.

In Chapter 17 of *Dream of the Red Chamber*, the Hengwu Pavilion is described as follows: "Above stood five clear rooms connected by a veranda, with corridors on all sides and green windows on oiled walls, more elegant than the other residences."
The "five-room" layout, subdued coloring, and refined atmosphere correspond strikingly to the architectural style of the Jiangxue Pavilion.

b. Directional Symbolism and Jiangnan Implications

The Jiangxue Pavilion is located in the southeastern corner of the Imperial Garden. The opening story of the Stone in *Dream of the Red Chamber* says, "Once the land in the southeast collapsed, and a place called Gusu appeared." The "southeast" is the symbolic direction of Jiangnan, which also corresponds to Dai-yu's native land. Thus, the location of the Jiangxue Pavilion carries a Jiangnan implication.

c. Overlapping Name Imagery

Within the palace stands the "Jiangxue Pavilion," while Bao-yu's study is named the "Jiangyun Pavilion," differing by only one character. The word "*jiang*" links to the Fairy Crimson Pearl (Dai-yu's former self), while "*xue*" echoes Xue Bao-chai through the homophony between "Xue" (snow) and "Xue" (surname). In Chapter 40, when Granny Liu visits the Garden, she marvels that the Hengwu Pavilion is "just like a cave of snow," which further reinforces the imagery of "snow."

d. Reconstruction Period and Consort Dong E's Aesthetic Preference

Historical records indicate that Consort Dong E's residences, the Yongshou Palace and the Chengqian Palace, were both renovated around 1655, and she was formally brought into the palace in 1656. The Shunzhi Emperor favored her deeply.
According to Johann Adam Schall von Bell, after her death "the Emperor sought life and death for her." The Jiangxue Pavilion was also rebuilt during the Shunzhi period. Its simple and graceful style likely reflects Consort Dong E's fondness for Jiangnan elegance and the Emperor's deference to her personal taste.

e. Sources of Information and the Author's Possible Knowledge

Mao Pijiang and Fang Yizhi were close friends, and Fang in turn maintained close relations with the missionary Johann Adam Schall von Bell. Schall held a high position in the court, serving as godfather to Empress Dowager Xiaozhuang and enjoying the Emperor's trust. Through this chain

of connection—Mao, Fang, and Schall—Mao Pijiang plausibly could have heard about the palace's inner gardens and transformed such details into the spatial descriptions of his novel.

In sum, the correspondence between the Hengwu Pavilion and the Jiangxue Pavilion is evident in their shared five-bay layout, restrained architectural palette, and southeastern position. Through this spatial symbolism, the author links the private garden and the imperial court on a metaphorical level, establishing a hidden connection between the Grand View Garden and the Imperial Garden.

4. The Historical Identity of Consort Dong E and the Documentary Record

a. Official Records and Imperial Representation

The most direct source on Consort Dong E comes from the *Imperially Composed Account of the Deeds of Empress Dong E* (《御制董鄂后行状》), personally written by the Shunzhi Emperor. In this document, the emperor praises her with exceptional reverence: "The Empress was filial and respectful, understanding the greater propriety"; "The elder women called her daughter, and the younger ones regarded her as an elder sister"; "She was extremely frugal and never used gold or jade"; "Gifted by nature, she became accomplished in calligraphy." The account even records her "concern for state affairs" and how she "advised against excessive executions in autumn," urging the emperor to show kindness to other consorts.

In *Reminiscences of the Shadow Plum Hermitage*, Mao Pijiang similarly described Dong Xiaowan as possessing "wisdom and discernment," noting that "those who heard of her could only sigh that no man of letters or moral virtue could rival her." This praise echoes the emperor's tone. Comparable language appears in Chen Weisong's *The Biography of Lady Wu Koukou*, which says that Wu "understood decorum, and in temperament and talent was no different from Lady Wan." Likewise, in *Dream of the Red Chamber*, Chapter 78, Bao-yu's elegy for Qing-wen, *Elegy to the Hibiscus Spirit*, describes her as "honored by all elder women for her grace and virtue."

Thus, imperial eulogy, private memorial, and fictional elegy form a triple intertext, aligning Consort Dong E, Dong Xiaowan, and their "projections" within a single symbolic field.

b. Non-Official Source: The Account of Adam Schall von Bell

The German Jesuit Adam Schall von Bell recorded in his memoir:

"The Shunzhi Emperor fell in love with the wife of a Manchu military officer. When this officer rebuked his wife, the emperor struck him with a most peculiar slap. The officer then died of rage,

or, as some say, took his own life. The emperor took the widow into the palace and made her a noble consort. Later she bore him a son, intended to be the heir apparent, but the child died prematurely."[13]

Since Consort Dong E did give birth to a son who was made crown prince but died young, it is reasonable to infer that the "noble consort" in Schall von Bell's account refers to her.

c. Genealogical Links and the Enigma of Shuo-sai

The central question of this anecdote lies in how a soldier's wife could have met the emperor. The answer may be related to the early Qing practice of "rotation of imperial princes' wives and consorts serving in the palace," a Manchu custom by which women from princely households periodically attended the empress dowager and the empress.

Before Consort Dong E entered the palace, Emperor Shunzhi's elder brother, Shuo-sai (Prince Chengze), died in 1654. Shuo-sai had fought alongside his uncles Dorgon and Duoduo in numerous campaigns, earning high distinction. In May 1645, he accompanied Duoduo in taking Nanjing and toppling the Hongguang regime of the Southern Ming, matching the profile of the "Manchu officer" described by Schall von Bell. Shuo-sai died in 1655, and Consort Dong E entered the palace in 1656, chronologically consistent. If Schall's record indeed refers to Shuo-sai, then Consort Dong E may have been his widow.

According to the *Genealogy of the Aisin Gioro Clan*[14], Shuo-sai had five consorts in total: one principal, one secondary, one side, and two lesser consorts. For the first four, the record provides detailed information, including their clans, surnames, father's names, and official titles. Yet under the entry "another lesser consort," no further information is given: her name, place of origin, and family background are entirely omitted. Meanwhile, the *Imperially Composed Account of the Deeds of Empress Dong E* states: "The Empress reared in the palace two daughters of Prince Chengze and one daughter of Prince An, nurturing them daily with affection no less than that of a birth mother." This suggests that Dong E personally raised Shuo-sai's daughters and reveals her close connection with his household.

Furthermore, Mao Qiling, in the preface to the *Palace Version of The Palace of Eternal Life* [15], wrote: "Mr Hong, at the request of the heir of Prince Zhuang, composed a palace play based on the Tang tale *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow*, which became widely performed in the theaters."

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[13] Wei Te (German), *Biography of Johann Adam Schall von Bell* (323 pp.).

[14] Aisin Gioro Genealogy, Volume A (Jiǎ cè).

[15] Mao Qiling, *Collected Works from Xihe*, Preface 24: "Preface to *The Palace of Eternal Life* (Courtyard Edition)."

Prince Zhuang refers to Shuo-sai, whose son Borgodo commissioned the play. Since the drama centers on Emperor Xuanzong's love affair with his son's consort, it readily evokes the rumored story of Shunzhi and his brother's widow.

According to the *Veritable Records of the Qianlong Emperor* and other archival materials, during the Qing conquest of the South, military officers often seized property and women, who were then presented to the court; the emperor and princes divided them among themselves. After Dorgon's death, these captured women were again distributed among the imperial clans. This institutional pattern of "military merit–spoils–entrance to the palace" provides a plausible framework for understanding the transformation in Consort Dong E's status.

The narrative motifs discussed earlier, including the imperial gift transferred by Prince Bei-Jing, Dai-yu's rejection of it, the pretext that "Prince Bei-Jing lost a beloved concubine," and his role within Qin Ke-qing's funeral sequence, all find clear correspondence here. With the emergence of Shuo-sai's identity, these seemingly incidental details reveal the historical prototype underlying Prince Bei-Jing and the hidden palace intrigue he represents. The "courtly cipher" embedded in *Dream of the Red Chamber* thus comes fully into view.

d. Political and Cultural Influence

Consort Dong E was not only the favored consort of Emperor Shunzhi but also occupied a distinctive position in both political and cultural spheres.

- **Amnesty upon her elevation**
  In the seventeenth year of Shunzhi's reign, when Consort Dong was elevated to the rank of Imperial Noble Consort, the court proclaimed a general amnesty: "On this day of celebration, a special act of imperial clemency is granted." [16]This was the only amnesty in the Qing dynasty ever issued on the occasion of a consort's investiture, attesting to her unparalleled status.

- **Cultural realignment**
  Records indicate that after Dong E's elevation, Emperor Shunzhi ordered: "No Manchu script shall appear on the plaques of the Imperial Ancestral Temple; those already inscribed shall be scraped off and replaced with Chinese characters." This decree marked a decisive turn toward a pro-Han cultural policy. Significantly, this political gesture

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[16] The Veritable Records of the Qing Emperor Shizu ("The Great Qing Shizu-ti Tian Long-yun Ding-tong Jian-ji Ying-rui Qin-wen Xian-wu Da-de Hong-gong Zhi-ren Chun-xiao Zhang Huangdi"), Vol. 105.

resonates with Lin Dai-yu's depiction of Wang Zhaojun in the *Five Beauties* poems of *Dream of the Red Chamber*.

- **Admonition before death**
  According to the *Imperially Composed Account of the Deeds of Empress Dong E*, even in illness she urged the emperor to "spare those who might still be redeemed, for many under severe charges have not yet been granted leniency." It further records that she often persuaded the emperor to reopen judicial cases, leading to the release of numerous prisoners. After her death, Emperor Shunzhi honored her dying wish by suspending the autumn executions for the following year.

- **Literary corroboration**
  Wu Wei-ye's poem *Buddhist Hymns from Mount Qingliang*[17] reads: "I faintly heard the Golden Cock Edict, issued through the Jade Consort." The "Golden Cock Edict" refers to the imperial amnesty decrees that were proclaimed on the occasions of Dong E's elevation and death. Although Wu did not explicitly name the subject of the poem, every general amnesty during Emperor Shunzhi's reign was issued because of Consort Dong E, making her the implied referent of the verse.

e. The Prevention of Deposition and the Veiling of Identity

If Consort Dong E was indeed Dong Xiaowan, she would have been thirty-three by East Asian reckoning when she entered the palace, while Emperor Shunzhi was nineteen and had already had two empresses, both of whom displeased him. The *Imperially Composed Account of the Deeds of Empress Dong E* records her words: "Your Majesty is right in censuring the Empress… If Your Majesty should rashly depose her, I would not dare to live."

This passage reveals that Shunzhi intended to depose the second empress but was dissuaded by Dong E's insistence, which preserved the Empress's position. Considering Dong Xiaowan's age and background, this suggests that her purpose in entering the palace was not to compete for favor but to fulfill a different moral or political mission. Her restraint in matters of rank and affection points to a conscious effort to maintain harmony within the court.

Furthermore, the *Imperially Composed Account of the Deeds of Empress Dong E* identifies her as "the daughter of Eshuo of the Dong-E clan," Eshuo being a minister of the Imperial Household. If Dong Xiaowan's identity required concealment, such an attribution could have served as a deliberate cover.

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[17] Wu Weiye (late Ming–early Qing period), *Collected Works from Meicun* (*Meicun ji*), juan 3.

Summary

The exceptional nature of Consort Dong E lies not only in the fact that her elevation to Imperial Noble Consort was accompanied by a general amnesty, but also in her concern for justice at the end of her life, when she urged Shunzhi to halt the autumn executions. Many of those condemned in the early Qing were Ming loyalists and anti-Qing rebels; her compassion for them suggests a humanitarian concern that transcended ethnic boundaries. Her advocacy of leniency, together with her role in advancing the cultural policy of "abandoning Manchu script for Chinese," reveals a woman deeply conversant with Han learning and literati values. In this light, her intellect and moral bearing strikingly parallel those of Dong Xiaowan, reinforcing their convergence as both literary archetype and historical symbol.

5. *Mourning Scroll at Solitary Hill*: Visual Intertext and the Reconstruction of Memory

The previous section discussed the overlapping between the historical records of Consort Dong E and the narratives surrounding Dong Xiaowan. This correspondence extends beyond texts and elegies into the visual arts, with *Mourning Scroll at Solitary Hill* (*Gushan Ganshi Tu*) standing as the most representative example.

a. Overview and Inscriptions

The painting is dated to the fifth year of the Shunzhi reign (1648) and is said to have been created by Dong Xiaowan at the request of Gong Weiliu, a former Hanlin scholar of the Ming. It depicts several branches of white plum in ink, rendered in a restrained and elegant style. The painting bears the seal *Xiaowan* and includes a seven-character quatrain and an extensive inscription:

"I turn to Solitary Hill—no home remains;
I shun the world—no speaking flower again.
The recluse and the beauty weep as one;
Regret entrusting ice and snow to a mistaken life.

I once studied painting with Sister Wanlan in the Garden of Painted Waters. We playfully affixed plum petals to a fan, she drew the branches, I completed them. The Recluse of the Nests remarked: 'In this way of painting plum blossoms, you open a new path within the old, achieving the utmost charm of hidden fragrance.'

I once presented such a fan to Master Tongzhang; it was widely praised as the finest creation of our garden.

In the last days of the *wuxu* year, under clear skies and snow weighing upon the eaves, Elder Taigong of the Purple Pavilion came to visit and showed me his work *Mourning Scroll at Solitary Hill*, requesting that I compose a supplement to it.

By lamplight I dipped my brush in ink, using the technique of Farmer Zhushi, and completed this small piece.

He said: 'The withered splendor returns to life in coldness,' a verse of Master Jingjie (Tao Qian), and I felt it shared the same sorrowful beauty as Taigong's work of remembrance.

~ Dong Bai."

Later collectors such as Wu Zhiying and Yi Shunding in the late Qing and early Republican eras also appended colophons to the piece.

b. Points of Doubt and Contradiction

Although the painting itself is executed with delicacy, the inscription presents several internal inconsistencies that resist straightforward explanation.

- **The problem of "Sister Wanlan"**
  The inscription states, "I once studied painting with Sister Wanlan in the Garden of Painted Waters," apparently referring to Gong Wanlan, daughter of Gong Weiliu, who later married Mao Bao. Yet a closer examination of their birth years and family relations renders this improbable. Mao Pijiang (1611–1693) and Gong Weiliu (1611–1680) were contemporaries; Dong Xiaowan (1624–1651) was thirteen years younger than Mao. Gong Wanlan, however, was of the same generation as Mao Bao, Mao's much younger half-brother, who was thirty-three years her junior. It would thus be impossible for Gong Weiliu to have a daughter older than Dong Xiaowan. For this reason, Dong's calling her "Sister Wanlan" is implausible both in age logic and in conventional forms of address.

- **The chronological conflict of the Shuihui Garden**
  The inscription mentions "studying painting in the Shuihui Garden," yet Mao Pijiang did not acquire and rebuild this estate until 1654, three years after Dong Xiaowan's death.

- **The self-styling of "Chaomin the Elder"**
  Mao Pijiang adopted the sobriquet "Chaomin the Elder" only in his later years. In 1648, he was thirty-eight years old, and Dong could not have referred to him by this later epithet.

- **The problematic use of the word"to command"**
  The inscription says that someone "commanded her to make a supplement." The verb "to command" carries an authoritative tone inappropriate for a request from Gong Weiliu to Dong Xiaowan. However, Mao Pijiang was known to have commissioned seals reading "Commanded the concubine to imitate the ancients" for his concubines Cai Han and Jin Yue, used on their paintings.

Taken together, these contradictions suggest that *Mourning Scroll at Solitary Hill* was likely not painted by Dong Xiaowan herself, but rather produced by Mao Pijiang, possibly executed by one of his concubines and posthumously inscribed or stamped with Dong's name and seal, an act of symbolic substitution or "grafting of flowers."

c. Cai Han, Jin Yue, and the Possibility of "grafting of flowers"

In his later years, Mao Pijiang had two concubines, Cai Han and Jin Yue, who were collectively known as "the two painters of the Mao household." Both were skilled in painting plum blossoms. In volume eleven of Mao's *Tongren ji* (*Collected Works of Fellow Minds*), under *Verses on the Women's Quarters in the Fragrant-Dye Pavilion*, there are two poems titled "Plum Blossoms Pasted on a Fan, to the Tune of *A Cut of Plum*." These explicitly describe the two women pasting plum petals on fans to form paintings, precisely the same technique mentioned in the inscription of *Mourning Scroll at Solitary Hill*.

Mao also left behind a seal reading "Commanded the concubines to Imitate the Ancients," which corresponds to the inscription's phrase "commanded to make a supplement." If the painting was executed by these women, then inscribed and stamped with the *Xiaowan* seal by Mao himself, the contradictions within the work could be readily explained. In other words, *Mourning Scroll at Solitary Hill* appears less a genuine relic of Dong Xiaowan than a symbolic reconstruction of mourning by Mao Pijiang, a process akin to the retrospective revisions he likely made in *Reminiscences of the Shadow Plum Hermitage*.

d. Cultural Ciphers: *The Flower That Understands Speech* and *Snow*

Within the inscription, two key images appear side by side: the speaking flower (*the Flower That Understands Speech)* and *snow.*

The Flower That Understands Speech originates from the legend of Yang Guifei and, in *Dream of the Red Chamber*, is repeatedly associated with figures such as Bao-chai and Xi-ren, multiple projections of the same archetype. *Snow,* on the other hand, directly evokes Xue Bao-chai, not only through the phonetic echo between *xue* (Snow) and *Xue* (her surname), but also through the imagery of her "Snowy Grotto" residence and the line "A golden hairpin buried in the snow."

The juxtaposition of these two symbols allows *Mourning Scroll at Solitary Hill* to transcend the realm of private commemoration. Through the cipher of "Flower That Understands Speech–Snow," the painting enters the broader symbolic system of *Dream of the Red Chamber.*

e. The Collectors' Doubts and the Posthumous Enigma

In the late Qing period, the collector Wu Zhiying inscribed the painting with the line, "Dong Xiaowan's fragrant traces leave one restless and unsettled," suggesting her skepticism about both the painting's authenticity and Dong Xiaowan's burial site. Yi Shunding was even more explicit: "The shadow of plum blossoms still lingers at the Studio of Shadowed Plum Blossoms, was she truly buried in the Garden of Painted Waters?" His words directly question the credibility of Mao Pijiang's account of Dong's interment.

Thus, *Mourning Scroll at Solitary Hill* became not merely an artistic relic, but a focal point in a cultural debate about memory and reconstruction.

f. Intertext with the Fictional Paintings in *Dream of the Red Chamber*

This painting of disputed authenticity, *Mourning Scroll at Solitary Hill,* finds clear resonance with the fictional paintings that appear throughout *Dream of the Red Chamber.*

In Tan-chun's chamber hangs Mi Fu's *Misty Rain Scroll,* a work that never existed in historical record. The novel also mentions Tang Bohu's *Spring Slumber of the Crabapple* and Qiu Ying's *Snow of Beauty,* both purely imagined creations.

Like *Mourning Scroll at Solitary Hill,* these "false paintings" hover between truth and illusion: they may be later fabrications or deliberate allegorical devices within the narrative. The question of authenticity does not diminish their symbolic function; rather, it enhances the novel's hallmark interplay of reality and illusion.

Consequently, although *Mourning Scroll at Solitary Hill* appears to be a posthumous work of Dong Xiaowan, its inscription and brushwork more likely reflect Mao Pijiang's art of substitution. Regardless of its authenticity, the painting, through the symbolic pairing of "Flower That Understands Speech–Snow," links Dong Xiaowan (and by extension Consort Dong E) to the female figures of *Dream of the Red Chamber.*

It corresponds directly with the textual ambiguities surrounding *Reminiscences of the Shadow Plum Hermitage,* together revealing Mao Pijiang's deliberate manipulation of mourning and memory. Within this interwoven structure of truth and fiction, the divided identities and allegorical design of *Dream of the Red Chamber* emerge as the author's means of preserving and

transmitting historical memory, an invitation for readers to reinterpret a history long veiled by silence.

Summary of Part III

In Emperor Shunzhi's own writing, Consort Dong E is portrayed as a "virtuous and benevolent empress," while in Mao Pijiang's account, Dong Xiaowan appears as an "extraordinary woman." Remarkably, these two mourning texts, produced in entirely different contexts, converge through intertextual mirroring to construct a similar feminine archetype: intelligent, graceful, humble, and possessed of moral discernment.

Dream of the Red Chamber develops its mosaic of characters precisely within this framework of "intertextual mirroring." The grand state funeral of Qin Ke-qing, the illusory homecoming of Yuan-chun, the "Snowy Grotto" residence of Bao-chai, the Qixi cipher of Qiao-jie, and the adaptation of Lin Siniang's tale of martyrdom: all serve as reflections of Consort Dong E and Dong Xiaowan. Even more striking is the novel's repeated invocation of the motif of "death in autumn," which encodes the historical memory of Consort Dong E's death in autumn and positions it at the core of the novel's narrative chain of autumnal mourning.

Through a projectional strategy, the author disperses Consort Dong E's destiny among multiple characters, gradually assembling them into a single "historical prototype." At the same time, through the technique of allegorical projection, additional historical figures are embedded within the novel, thereby revealing the larger allegory of a fallen age. This synthesis of character, history, and allegory constitutes the distinctive narrative texture of *Dream of the Red Chamber.*

More importantly, the "fourfold ciphers" analyzed in this section, the temporal cipher, the character cipher, the spatial cipher, and the cultural cipher, together form a hidden circuit linking the novel with historical memory. These ciphers resonate across dimensions of time, personhood, and space, quietly echoing the recollections of the early Qing court while supporting the novel's overarching narrative of "autumnal mourning."

The next section will turn to "The Expansion of the Projection System and the Allegory of the End of an Era," examining how *Dream of the Red Chamber* extends its symbolic network to intertwine personal fate with dynastic decline, thereby giving narrative form to the historical trauma of the Ming–Qing transition.

Part IV: The Expansion of the Projection System and the End-of-an-Era Allegory

The previous section focused on the dual projection of Consort Dong E and Dong Xiaowan, demonstrating how *Dream of the Red Chamber* employs the device of projection to dismantle a single historical woman into multiple fictional avatars. Yet the novel's allegorical mechanism does not end there. On a broader narrative plane, the author extends the same strategy of mirror-splitting and allusive projection to incorporate the political turbulence, dynastic trauma, and apocalyptic sentiment of the late-Ming and early-Qing transition into the fictional world.

This section of the study proceeds in three directions:

• examining how characters such as Wang Xi-feng reflect the shadow of late-Ming eunuch politics;

• analyzing the intertextual correspondences between Tan-chun and Zheng Cheng-gong, and Ying-chun and the Yongli Emperor;

• exploring how the novel constructs its "end-of-an-era" motif.

Through these layers of analysis, we can see how *Dream of the Red Chamber* forges an intrinsic resonance between individual destiny and dynastic collapse. Moreover, the projectional structure of the male and female protagonists, together with the novel's reverse chronology, suggests that the allegory has already completed its narrative circle.

A. The Projection of Power: The Hidden Projections of Wei Zhongxian

The *Dream*'s system of projections is not confined to poetic personas; it extends to a political dimension, embedding covert reflections of late-Ming history.

Among these, the infamous eunuch Wei Zhongxian, symbol of decadent autocracy, is encoded through a constellation of figures—Wang Xi-feng, Xia Shou-zhong, and Si'er—whose traits collectively reconstruct his image within the narrative network.

1. Wang Xi-feng's Prophecy and the "Ice-Mountain" Allegory

Wang Xi-feng's prophetic verse reads:

"The common bird comes from the end of an era,
admired for its worldly talents.

One line, two zeros, three men, and a wood,
weeps toward Jinling, sorrow lies ahead."

The accompanying illustration depicts a lone iceberg on which perches a female phoenix. Both the verse and its visual imagery echo the historical figure of Wei Zhongxian in multiple ways.

- The "female phoenix" is anomalous.
  In Chinese tradition, the male is *feng* and the female *huang*; depicting a female *feng* thus violates convention.
  This "gender inversion" alludes to rumors that Wei Zhongxian was "not wholly emasculated," reinforcing his identity as neither male nor female.

- The term "Common bird" (*fan niao*) also contains a pun on gender. The character *fan* (凡) is formed by adding a single dot to *ji* (几); ji is homophonous with *ji* ("rooster"), and both *ji* ("rooster") and *niao* ("bird") are colloquial euphemisms for the male organ in Chinese. The fact that fan adds only one dot suggests incompleteness. Thus, *fan niao* slyly denotes a eunuch whose body is mutilated but not entirely deprived of male traits, reinforcing the metaphor of being neither male nor female.

- The character riddle "One line, two zeros, three men, and a wood," forms the traditional character 檢 (Jian), the personal name of the Chongzhen Emperor, Zhu You-jian.
  Wei Zhongxian's downfall came precisely under Chongzhen's reign; he was banished to Fengyang and hanged himself en route.
  The verse's closing, "weeping toward Jinling," thus mirrors his historical fate.

- The "ice-mountain" recalls a popular contemporary play titled *The Ice Mountain*, which dramatizes Wei Zhongxian's confrontation with the Donglin Party official Yang Lian. The ice mountain depicted in Wang Xi-feng's prophetic verse illustration likely alludes to this play, while the rivalry between Xi-feng and her husband Jia Lian, who shares the same given name *Lian* as Yang Lian, reenacts in domestic miniature the same conflict of power and betrayal.

Through this multilayered complex of "female phoenix – common bird – ice mountain," the prophecy fuses gender inversion, political downfall, and theatrical memory into a single allegorical figure.

2. From Low Birth to Power Misalignment

Wang Xi-feng's background further parallels Wei's trajectory.
Though born into nobility, she is famously illiterate.
In Chapter 42, Bao-chai quips: "When words reach Sister Feng's mouth, there's nothing left to add. Thank heaven she cannot read!"
This humorous aside isolates Wang Xi-feng from the cultured heroines of the novel and evokes the historical "unlettered eunuch wielding supreme power."

Earlier, in Chapter 3, Grandmother Jia jokingly calls her "a notorious little rascal from a ruined household," further echoing the popular rumors of Wei Zhongxian's early life as a street ruffian.

3. Multiplying Reflections: Xia Shou-zhong and Si'er

The eunuch dimension of Wei's image surfaces directly in Xia Shou-zhong.
His given name shares the character "Zhong," and his extortions of the Jia Clan in Chapter 72 mirror Wei's notorious financial predations, from the "Yellow-pine Timber Case" to countless forced tributes.

In addition, Wei Zhongxian's birth name was "Wei Si" ("Wei Fourth"), and the character Si'er ("Fourth Girl") in the novel directly echoes it. Though a maid, Si'er's expulsion from the Grand View Garden parallels Wei Zhongxian's own banishment from the capital, forming a deliberate name-based correspondence between "Wei Si" and "Si'er."

4. Gender Inversion and the Storyteller's Hint

A subtler signal appears in Chapter 54, where the female storyteller performs the tale *The Phoenix Seeks Her Mate*, whose male protagonist is ironically named Wang Xi-feng.
This deliberate cross-gender confusion underscores the novel's strategy of inversion:
a woman endowed with masculine power mirrors a man stripped of it.

Taken together, Wang Xi-feng, Xia Shou-zhong, and Si'er form a composite "political double" of Wei Zhongxian.
Their shared imagery—the female phoenix, ice mountain, and vulgar bird—transposes the history of eunuch despotism into the microcosm of the Grand View Garden, giving the novel's "end-of-an-era" theme a concrete historical texture.

B. Tan-chun and Zheng Chenggong: A Boudoir Allegory of Restoration

Among the women in *Dream of the Red Chamber*, Tan-chun is one of the few endowed with a consciousness of the state and an aptitude for governance. Her prophetic verse, riddle, birthday,

chamber decorations, and even her moral stances all contain symbolic cues pointing to the character “Zheng” (鄭). Set against the historical backdrop of the late Ming and early Qing, Tan-chun corresponds profoundly to the anti-Qing commander Zheng Chenggong (Koxinga).

1. The “Zheng” Cipher in the Prophecy and Riddle

In Chapter 5, Tan-chun’s prophetic verse features the key words *kite*, *vast sea*, *great ship*, *Qingming*, and *east wind*. Her lantern riddle also takes the kite as its answer:

“Children on the steps look upward in delight;
Best adorned for Qingming’s gentle light.
When threads of silk snap, all strength departs;
Blame not the east wind for your parting hearts.”

The word *zheng* (箏, kite) is homophonous with *Zheng* (鄭); and the left component of the traditional graph 鄭 is *dian* (奠), which denotes the sacrificial offering used in Qingming rites. Moreover, the *east wind* has long symbolized hope and renewal.

Amid the turbulence of the late Ming, people likened the anti-Qing navy led by Zheng Chenggong to that very *east wind*, entrusting to it their aspirations for dynastic restoration.

The images of the great ship and vast sea evoke Zheng’s maritime campaigns, while the song line “A single sail braves three thousand miles of storm, leaving behind family and home alike” corresponds to his later retreat to Taiwan. The line “fate declines at the end of an era” captures his historical trajectory: a man of brilliance defeated by the times.

2. Birthday and the “Calligrapher-General” Identity Cipher

Tan-chun’s birthday falls on the third day of the third lunar month, the Shangsi Festival, a day traditionally associated with flying kites and with Wang Xizhi’s composition of the *Preface to the Orchid Pavilion*. This subtly aligns with Zheng Chenggong’s reputation for calligraphic talent.

Her maids are named *Shi-shu* and *Cui-mo,* together meaning “book and ink.” Her chamber contains model calligraphies and dozens of treasured inkstones, resembling a refined scholar’s study. This “literati boudoir” not only displays her cultivated temperament but also mirrors Zheng’s dual embodiment of civil culture and martial prowess.

3. Bloodline and the Projection of “Severed Kinship”

Renowned for his anti-Qing exploits, Zheng Chenggong was granted the imperial surname Zhu by the Southern Ming Longwu Emperor and renamed Chenggong, hence the title *Lord of the Imperial Surname*. After the Qing conquest of Jiangnan in 1645, his father Zheng Zhilong surrendered, while Zheng Chenggong refused and broke with his father in defiance.

In Chapter 55 of *Dream of the Red Chamber*, Tan-chun, born to Concubine Zhao, firmly rejects her mother's request. Upon hearing this, Wang Xi-feng exclaims, "What a capable Third Young Lady, pity she was not born of the Mistress herself!"

Tan-chun's concubine-born status and her firm rejection of her mother's request parallel Zheng's moral break with his father after the latter's capitulation to the Qing.

4. "Dweller beneath the Banana" and the Zheng Topos

In the poetry club, Tan-chun styles herself as "*Dweller beneath the Banana*." Bananas abound in Taiwan, and the parable *"The Banana Leaf Shelters the Deer"* in *Liezi: King Mu of Zhou* features a protagonist surnamed Zheng. The associative chain "banana – Zheng – Taiwan" thus forms a hidden line reinforcing Tan-chun's connection to the Zheng lineage.

5. The "Zhen-zhen Kingdom" and the Overseas Backdrop

In Chapter 52, **Xue Bao-qin** claims to have traveled in the *Zhen-zhen Kingdom*, a name that can be heard as *"the true Zheng state."* Her mention of people with "Western hair" and a girl carrying a Japanese sword evokes Zheng Chenggong's Dutch–Japanese background: his mother was Japanese, and he later defeated the Dutch to recover Taiwan. Bao-qin's tale thus provides collateral evidence for the symbolic connection between Tan-chun and Zheng Chenggong.

6. "A Hundred-Legged Insect" and the End-of-Era Critique

During the Garden inspection in Chapter 74, Tan-chun remarks:

"A great household like this cannot be destroyed from without all at once…
It must first destroy itself from within before it can be utterly ruined."

Read within the Zheng context, this becomes a judgment on the Southern Ming's self-disintegration: its downfall arose not merely from external invasion but from internal collapse. Through Tan-chun, the insight and sorrow of a loyalist witnessing the end of his age are articulated with precision.

7. Ping-er's Support and the Intertext of "Entering the Palace"

In Chapter 56, Ping-er fully supports Tan-chun's reform of the Grand View Garden. If Tan-chun represents a boudoir projection of Zheng Chenggong, Ping-er quietly mirrors another historical trajectory: Dong Xiaowan's entry into politics through her symbolic "entering the palace."

As noted earlier, Ping-er functions as Dai-yu's projection, while Dai-yu's *Five Beauties* poem on Xi Shi and her repeated comparisons to Xi Shi sustain the motif of "entering the palace." In the Wu dialect, *Ping'er* closely approximates Dai-yu's nickname *Pin'er*, itself derived from Xi Shi's "frowning beauty" epithet. Thus, through both sound and meaning, Ping'er is linked to Dai-yu and Xi Shi alike, becoming a symbolic embodiment of the woman who enters the palace to confront the chaos of an era.

Thus, the pairing of Ping'er and Tan-chun essentially re-enacts the Xi Shi paradigm, in which the woman enters the enemy court to aid her homeland's cause. One embodies external resistance (Zheng Chenggong), while the other embodies internal strategic allure (Dong Xiaowan).

This inner–outer duality is literarized in the novel through the juxtaposition of Tan-chun and Ping'er.

Thus, Tan-chun's prophetic verse and riddle, her birthday, her maids' names, the scholarly furnishing of her room, and her remark on the "hundred-legged insect" all interlock with Zheng Chenggong's life pattern. She stands as both "calligrapher-general" and "lonely loyalist," bearing the dual emblems of restorationist ideal and historical frustration.

Through the figure of Tan-chun, *Dream of the Red Chamber* transposes Zheng Chenggong's historical projection into the inner chambers, refracting the allegory of politics and nationhood within a corner of the Grand View Garden, and further deepening the overarching motif of the "end-of-an-era" allegory.

C. Ying-chun and the Yongli Emperor: The End-Times Allegory of Ziling Islet

Within the system of projection, Jia Ying-chun functions as a symbolic avatar of the Yongli Emperor, reflecting the final collapse of the Southern Ming.

Her prophetic verse, "The guy is a wolf of Mount Zhongshan; when successful, he becomes reckless," conceals the graph *sun* (孫), pointing to Sun Kewang, the betrayer under Yongli. Ying-chun's marriage plot thus allegorizes the emperor's tragic death.

Her residence, Ziling Islet (*zi* meaning "purple"), echoes imperial imagery such as the Purple Forbidden City.

Yongli's title as Prince of Gui (桂王) corresponds to Ying-chun's teasing nickname "Er Mutou" ("two blocks of wood"): the graph *gui* (桂) shares the same root as wood (木). The text contains a similar type of hint elsewhere: Bao-yu's poem at Ziling Islet, "No longer the knock of chess stones through long Yong-lit hours" includes the character yong (the same graph as in Yongli Emperor), while "chess" (棋) is derived from "wood" (木). Together with Ying-chun's maid named Si-qi (司棋), these word elements align on the semantic level with *gui* (桂), further confirming her symbolic correspondence to the historical prototype.

Narratively, the chapters following Ying-chun's preparation to "marry out" are filled with an atmosphere of mourning. In Chapter 79, Bao-yu "wanders daily around the area of Ziling Islet, sighing, 'The pond grew cold overnight with the autumn wind,'" showing "a manner as if recalling one who has passed away."

Immediately afterward, Xiang-ling appears to report that Xue Pan is to marry Xia Jingui. Xiang-ling mentions that the Xia clan is "the Gui-flower Xia family" and adds, "their entire line has perished afterward." The name Xia Jingui itself conceals layered symbolism, and the accumulation of these images forms an intricate "name cipher," subtly revealing that the appearance of Xue Pan (as the figure of Wu Sangui) signifies the end of the old dynasty, symbolizing Wu Sangui's betrayal of Yongli, his regicide, and self-proclamation as king.

This chain exemplifies the author's favored counterpoint technique: arranging covert correspondences among character fates within the same narrative unit, so that historical events are silently re-threaded through fictional turns. The juxtaposition Ying-chun ↔ Xiang-ling parallels the cluster in Chapter 78—Lin Siniang, Qing-wen's death, and Bao-chai's departure—each mapping shifts in history through women's destinies.

Ying-chun's departure, juxtaposed with Xue Pan's entrance and his act of "taking," dramatizes an allegorical transfer of power within the narrative. This pairing is not simply a plot device but a carefully staged reflection of historical succession and upheaval. The inspection of the Grand View Garden, which culminates at Ziling Islet, serves as a symbolic reenactment of the overrunning of the last bastion of the Southern Ming.

D. The Allegory of the Age: The Cipher of the "End of an Era"

1. Textual Evidence and the Writing of Decline

From the very opening chapters of *Dream of the Red Chamber*, the phrase "end of an era" became a recurring keyword.

In Chapter 1, Jia Yu-cun is described as "born at the end of an era."
In Chapter 2, Leng Zi-xing laments the Jia clan's decline, and the Zhiyanzhai marginal note reads: "Remember this line, by it we know that the Rong Mansion in this book already belongs to the end of an era." Another gloss on "Jia Jing's obsession with alchemy" remarks, "This too is a common malady of great families in their final days."
By Chapter 5, Tan-chun's prophetic poem declares "*Born at the end of an era, her fate wanes,*" and Wang Xi-feng's reads "*The common bird comes from the end of an era*."

Together with the first chapter's apocalyptic setting, "That day the earth collapsed in the southeast, leaving a place called Gusu," the entire novel seems to unfold beneath the shadow of cosmic ruin and Jiangnan's submersion. The main text and marginalia echo one another, layer upon layer, fixing "end of an era" as the novel's governing motif.

2. Historical Intertext: The Trauma of the "Ten Days of Yangzhou"

The motif of decline transcends the family sphere, reaching back to the cataclysm of the Ming–Qing transition.

In late April 1645, the city of Yangzhou, defended by Shi Kefa, fell after brief resistance; the ensuing "Ten Days of Yangzhou" brought slaughter and fire, tens of thousands slain.

Significantly, Lin Dai-yu's Burial of the Flowers takes place on April 26, the very day after Yangzhou's fall. Setting Dai-yu's moment of deepest sorrow amid the late-spring season, when all blossoms are in full bloom, paradoxically aligns beauty with the shadow of a bloody massacre.

This overlap of dates reveals the novel's underlying historical allegory: the scattering of flowers mirrors the collapse of the nation.

"Yangzhou" is also the only real place name repeated twice in the novel, both times tied to Dai-yu's parents: "Lady Jia passed away in Yangzhou" (Chapter 2) and "Lin Ruhai died in Yangzhou" (Chapter 14). By locating both deaths there, the author intimates the shared fate of countless families annihilated in the massacre.

3. The Paradox of Beauty and Grief

Aesthetic brilliance in *Dream of the Red Chamber* always conceals tragedy.
Moments of greatest beauty are shot through with premonitions of death:

- "*White bones piled like mountains, their names forgotten*" (Chapter 8) appears amid Bao-yu and Bao-chai's tender conversation.
- "*A thousand beauties share one tomb* (窟 *ku*, homophonous with 哭 *cry*), and *ten thousand charms drink from the same cup* (杯 *bei*, homophonous with 悲 *sorrow*)" resounds through the heavenly music of Chapter 5.
- Dai-yu's flower-burial, set near Grain in Ear (*Mangzhong*) on April 26, coincides with the season's lushest bloom, yet *mangzhong* (芒种) puns on *wangzhong* (亡种, "the extinction of the clan").

Such juxtapositions of splendor and ruin encode the novel's dialectic: beneath exquisite surface lies the semantic core of decline.
The work is therefore not merely a tale of familial decay, but a literary act of mourning by Ming loyalist culture for the collapse of an age.

4. "The Calamity of the Southern Commandery" and the Ming Loyalist Voice

In Chapter 1, Zhen Shi-yin's neighbor, the Gourd Temple, is burned: "Soon fire spread from one house to another until the whole street became a flaming mountain." The *Jiaxu* commentary adds: "It writes the true root of the calamity that befell the Southern Metropolitan Region (南直召祸)."
"Southern Metropolitan" (Nan Zhi) was the Ming term for Southern Zhili, an administrative region centered on Nanjing that was dismantled and reorganized under Qing rule after 1645. Zhiyanzhai's use of this obsolete Ming designation betrays a loyalist's diction. His phrasing points to a causal logic in which resistance led to increasingly brutal Qing reprisals, beginning with the sack of Yangzhou and followed by the suppression of Jiading, Jiangyin, Kunshan, and other Jiangnan cities. The fires consuming Zhen Shi-yin's street thus mirror the historical conflagrations that accompanied the collapse of the fallen dynasty.

Though not direct historical evidence, the marginalia offer invaluable testimony to the text's loyalist milieu.

5. The Horizon of Drama and Cultural Time

The novel quotes over thirty plays, from *The Romance of the Western Chamber* and *The Peony Pavilion* to early-Qing works such as *The Palace of Eternal Life* (1688). All belong to Yuan, Ming, or early-Qing theatrical memory; none reflect later mid-Qing genres.

Most striking is the absence of *The Peach Blossom Fan* (1699), the canonical tragedy of the Ming's fall. This omission may indicate either that *Dream* predates the play's popularity or that its author's cultural horizon remained anchored in loyalist theater. Thus, the operatic genealogy of *Dream of the Red Chamber* itself constitutes a "theatrical reenactment of remnant culture," serving as a cultural annotation to the atmosphere of the end of an era.

In sum, "*end of an era"* is not a casual phrase but the hidden axis uniting "projection – intertext – prototype."
From Yangzhou's bloodshed to the burning of Southern Zhili, from the loyalist tone of the marginalia to the theatrical memory of late Ming, *Dream of the Red Chamber* fuses the private sorrow of its lovers with the civilizational catastrophe of dynastic change, rewriting history as an allegory of extinction.

The following section will show how this cipher of decline binds together the novel's multiple strategies, forming a coherent internal design.

E. Bao-yu's Projection and the Reverse Chronology

1. The "Decay-before-Splendor" Architecture of Chapter 2

In Chapter 2 of *Dream of the Red Chamber*, Jia Yu-cun chances upon a ruined monastery named **Zhitong Monastery**, its plaque broken and couplet faded:

"Having surplus after death, yet knowing not to withdraw one's hand;
Seeing no road ahead, yet longing to turn back."

Zhi Yanzhai calls this "the general commentary for the entire work," noting:

"Before writing the prosperity of Ning and Rong, it first depicts desolation;
Before writing the worldly illusion, it first shows awakening beyond the world;
wind swirling backward, snow dancing upstream;
a narrative method unseen in other novels."

This annotation reveals that the novel's opening desolation is deliberate: an architecture of "decay-before-splendor," a reverse chronology in which decline precedes prosperity and the ending is projected in advance.

2. The Monk Who "Turned a Somersault"

Yu-cun muses, “Perhaps one who has turned a somersault lives here, why not go in and see?” Inside, he finds a deaf and bloated old monk, toothless and incoherent. Twice, Zhi Yanzhai comments, “He has turned back.” This “somersault” is no jest but an allegorical marker: the old monk is Bao-yu’s future self. From the myth of the Divine Stone’s descent to Bao-yu’s ultimate renunciation, his life arc is prefigured here in reverse, paralleling Liu Xiang-lian’s final withdrawal from the world.

3. Reversal and Multiplicity

This “ending-first” design overlays the logic of projection.

- Bao-yu’s projection: the monk pre-enacts his future enlightenment, the conclusion precedes the narrative.

- Dai-yu’s projection: her fate is pre-figured repeatedly through others:
  Qing-wen as “Needle Goddess,”
  Ling-guan as the artist-performer;
  Bao-chai aligned with the Yang Guifei motif, heightening the “entering-the-palace” narrative;
  Yuan-chun’s exalted rituals evoke imperial funeral pomp;
  Qin Ke-qing’s sumptuous burial mirrors state obsequies;
  Qing-wen’s death and Bao-yu’s *Elegy for the Hibiscus Girl* turn mourning itself into text;
  You San-jie and Jin Chuan'er’s suicides echo the tragedy of the “chaste martyr.”

These successive “autumn deaths” form a time-chain—first month → autumn → mourning—secretly aligned with Consort Dong E’s death season.
Through such pre-enactments, Dai-yu’s destiny is narrated in fragments long before it occurs; the fate of her prototype, Dong Xiaowan, is thus fully foreshadowed within the first eighty chapters.

4. The Completed Circle of the First Eighty Chapters

If Mao Pijiang was indeed the author, then his private elegy and historical allegory are wholly absorbed into the novel:
the twin narratives of Dong Xiaowan and Consort Dong E,
the political allegories embodied in Wang Xi-feng, Tan-chun, and Ying-chun,
and the pervasive trauma of dynastic collapse, all transformed through projection and intertextual design into literary form.

Thus the first eighty chapters constitute a self-contained structure, both narratively and allegorically.

Dream of the Red Chamber is not an unfinished book; it is a work completed in meaning, its closure achieved within the symbolic system itself.

Conclusion

Across the whole, *Dream of the Red Chamber* constructs an extraordinarily intricate narrative mechanism linking characterization, intertext, and historical allegory.

1. Through the structure of projection, the author disassembles traits of real figures and distributes them among multiple characters, creating a web of mirrors that transforms people into bearers of historical meaning.

2. Through intertext with elegiac works such as *Reminiscences of the Shadow Plum Hermitage*, the novel draws continual "cipher elements": myth and history, garden and palace, are interwoven into a network of clues inviting decipherment.

3. Through traces left in court archives and Jiangnan memorial texts, the novel's time, space, and prototypes cease to be fictional, they become a literary rewriting of real events. These "ciphers" map the historical originals behind the characters, embedding Dong Xiaowan and others into the garden's dream world.

4. Through Bao-yu and Dai-yu's chains of embodiment, the novel completes, within its first eighty chapters, an allegorical circuit: Dai-yu's fate, Bao-yu's renunciation and the dynastic trauma all find their place.

Hence, the framework of "Projection – Intertext – Prototype" reveals how *Dream of the Red Chamber*, written as a literary puzzle, weaves personal destiny and dynastic fate into one complex allegorical web.

This interpretive model opens new pathways to the novel's internal logic and offers a fresh lens on its profound engagement with the trauma of the Ming–Qing transition.

By examining how projection distributes traits and experiences, how intertext draws on myth and history, and how prototypes anchor fictional events to real historical circumstances, this lens

enables a deeper understanding of the novel's profound engagement with cultural and historical upheaval.

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Author Biography

Zhuo Hong, pen name “Dongnan Yiyu,” graduated from Sun Yat-sen University in 1991. In 2020, she completed the full-length mystery novel *The Red Chamber Codex (“戏”说红楼)* originally titled *2020: Decrypting the Red Chamber Cipher (2020 之 破译红楼密码本)*. Drawing on *Dream of the Red Chamber (《红楼梦》)* as its central theme, the story follows a computer-science student studying in the United States who, while participating in a VR game assisted by AI reasoning, gradually uncovers the hidden structure and symbolic system behind the classic text. Though fictional, the novel is firmly grounded in genuine *Redology* research findings.

The work was first published on Amazon Books in 2020 and serialized simultaneously on Jinjiang Literature City and the WeChat official account “Dongnan Yiyu.” It was also accompanied by a fifteen-episode video series on Zhihu and Bilibili, further exploring the research topics discussed in the novel. Later, the entire book was translated into English under the same title *The Red Chamber Codex*, and, beginning in 2025, serialized on the U.S. web-fiction platform Royal Road.

The analytical framework presented in this paper originates from the *Redology* investigations and lines of reasoning developed within the novel itself.